# Kingmakers: The Revenant and the Remembrances

**by** varupikusu

## Summary

A retelling of the storyline, but with AU elements, mainly focusing on our two main protagonists. As such, please expect spoilers for basically the game. Told mostly from Roland's perspective. Prior playthrough/watching of NNK2 is recommended because some events may happen offscreen. There is an associated art blog on tumblt called ‘nnk2austuffs’ where I post some of the art I worked on for this fic. I don’t own anything regarding this fic, by the way.

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**Kingmakers: The Revenant and the Remembrances**

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Archive Warning:** Major Character Death

**Category:** Gen

**Fandom:** Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom (Video Game), Ni no Kuni

**Character:** Roland Crane, Evan Pettiwhisker Tildrum, Tani (Ni no Kuni), Batu (Ni no Kuni), tags will be updated - Character, Lofty (Ni no Kuni), Leander (Ni no Kuni), Queen Nerea (Ni no Kuni), Bracken Meadows

**Additional Tags:** Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Swearing, mentions of post-partum depression, Anxiety Attacks, Roland's mentally 60 here instead of 48, death mentions, Ghosts, Body Horror, Mentions of Burns, implied hallucinations, i'd tell you to skip the kingmaker battles but eh, there's still a bit of a plot thingy there, Natural Disasters, Minor Character Death, spoilers of AU in comments, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Oh yeah reminder that Roland pretty much wears gloves 24/7 here, Novelization, still can't write fighting so watch this crew do a no-damage run, also discrepancies in room layouts and whatnot, this idiot wrote much of it before they played the actual game whoops, some of the late-story/game lore reference both DLCs, just for full comprehension though hopefully, Ambiguous/Open Ending, Roland's son's name in this fic is not canon btw

**Series:** Part 1 of Kingmakers

**Stats:**
- Published: 2018-04-29
- Completed: 2019-08-22
- Chapters: 108/108
- Words: 153075
The highway was empty and unilluminated, save for the line of black cars speeding towards the capital

“We’ll be arriving shortly, Mr. President.”

The president, recognizable by the fringes of grey hair, nodded in thanks. “It must be quite taxing for you to drive this early in the morning.” “Not a problem, sir.” A press of a button somewhere behind the driver’s seat, and a radio crackled to life.

“-sion has been met with much debate: must the president resign in such a shaky period of time? A summit will be held in an hour, and the president has voiced his hopes to convince the rest of countries in the Union that his experience uld be better used elsewhere-“

“Whew, again with the debate.” The driver piped up. “After weeks of the same topic, I feel the urge to just disconnect myself from the media.”

A dry chuckle from the president. “It’ll get resolved soon, and I’ll start getting used to being called Roland again... Hm?” A glint from outside the car window attracted the older man’s attention, and he turned to get a better look.

It was a missile- no, a nuke- heading in the same direction as they were, and by the time the driver uttered a alarmed cry, the red-hot plume of smoke had dove into the city. They had only seconds to witness the city crumbling in the wake of death’s flowering before the sonic boom tossed their car backwards into hell.

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The next thing Roland found out was that instead of feeling the asphalt melt the skin off his fingers, he was kneeling with his hands pressed into a red carpet. A very comfy one, at that.

What in the world…?

He barely had any time to brush off the surreal feeling of both the carpet and the fact that he was alive before a blonde-haired boy(barely above his tens, Roland estimated) held out a knife in front of him, hands shaking.

“I-I am Evan Pettiwhisker Tildrum, King of Ding Dong Dell!” The boy’s voice quavered. “Who… who are you?” Now that his vision was finally focused, Roland could see a pair of cat’s ears and tail on the boy. This... Evan, a king, with cat ears and a slowly swishing tail.

What in the world?

“Never mind who.” Roland responded, picking himself up. “The question is where…” A quick survey of his surroundings told him that he was in a well-decorated room, with at least a few brass statues and stands lining the walls. To his left was a mirror... And that was him, when he was probably in his twenties. The last birthday he had was his sixtieth.

“What in the world?”
Feeling the urge to alleviate his increasing disorientation and vertigo, he sauntered past Evan, who weakly uttered something akin to cease and desist, and out of the room, where the decorations further confirmed that he was indeed in a place large enough for a king to live in. He breathed in the humid air— it was stormy outside— and took out his phone. No signal. He stuck it back in his pocket and thought.

He was on his way to the summit by car, on a highway. Now, he was indoors, aged down, chin resting on hand to help him think. There was no suitable explanation other than everything being a dream… A lucid dream, right before his less-than-comfortable death. That would explain the weird appearance of the kid.

Said kid ran up to him and continued his shouting. “Intruder! Someone, arrest this man!” No response. “Where is everyone… Nella? Nella, where are you?” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Oh, right… She must be preparing for the ceremony…”

It’d be better if there wasn’t actual guards to stop him from finding out where he was, Roland mused. “Sorry, but I’m not in the mood to play right now, little guy.” This upset the little guy greatly. “How dare you speak to me like that?! I told you- I am a king!” “Heh. Sure you are. Can I ask you something?” “W-what?”

“Am I dead?”

“What?”

The rumbling of the floor from an explosion below them was not any better as an answer, and Evan immediately caught onto it, “Was that your doing, intruder?!” With the events taking a turn for the threatening, Roland took a step back mentally. Consider the kid was speaking the truth. What would lead to an explosion so close to a king’s sleeping quarters? An invasion, definitely. But if the king was unaware of an incoming invasion… He began to walk towards the stairs at the far end of the corridor.

“All right, Your Majesty. I’m going to take a look around. Will you be a good boy and wait here for me?” “W-wait! How dare you just walk away from me like that…!”

Roland hadn’t even gotten to the base of the stairs—in a castle, he recognised, but much grander than the ones he’d learned in history books) before another explosion shook the floor, and when he did, he heard voices from the room beyond. Peeking around the semi-opened door revealed two guards in armor… Two mouse guards, to be exact.

“This is too easy!” “And now, we just have to deal with the little…” Ah, just as he thought. A coup was in place-

“Halt, intruder!” The little king pushed the door wide open to reach his “protectors” and turned around, pointing at him with the dagger. “You will go no further. Guards! Seize him!”

Said guards, after a moment of disbelief, prowled closer to the boy. One of them raised his sword, ready to strike downwards-

The standard crack of a gun— twice— and the two guards were down on the ground. Well, that was probably why people always made jokes about bringing a gun to a sword fight, Roland thought, lowering his pistol. More muffled voices to his front and left. That meant there were more contributors than he had thought. He picked up the shortsword the guard had dropped from the
ground and turned to Evan, who understandably stumbled backwards with a squeak.

“They’re not here to protect you. Get back.” Without much ammo left, Roland was very, very thankful for the fact that he was currently in a stronger, younger body, as more guards ran into the room, shouting commands at each other to get the king later.

A fight and more unconscious mice on the ground later, Roland turned around to a very afraid Evan, who cowered against the door as the former approached. “D-don’t come any closer!” The younger boy cried. “Somebody! Arrest this man!”

Roland resisted the urge to pinch between his eyebrows. Sure, the kid was very young, it was natural that he’d be scared of someone who just appeared in his room from nowhere, but it should be clear to him now that the guards were hostile.

“Look, open your eyes. No one’s going to come to help- nobody good, at any rate. We should both try to get out of here while we can.” Evan was still not convinced, apparently. “What do you mean?” “It’s a coup.” “Here…?”

Voices from the adjacent rooms, again. “Have you found the boy?” “No, but my men should report in shortly!” At that, Roland turned to Evan, who finally had reality catch up to him and was currently deep in thought. “Come on, let’s hurry out of here first.” “Huh? But… alright.”

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“L-Lord Mausinger! The boy… he’s escaped!”

“No matter. He’s too sheltered to know where to run. We’ll find him soon enough. Or… Our Black Knight will.”

“And the throne of Ding Dong Dell will be yours, Lord Mausinger. All according to plan…”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this chapter!

I haven't written long fics before, and English isn't my first language, so please understand if I'm a bit less fluent with writing than I hoped! Either way, the AU factors won't come up until what would be the dream sequence right after Act 1 of the game, so you might have to wait until the next chapter before I start getting off track, haha. I've also made a tumblr to record some of the concept art I did for this fic, but I don't recommend searching for it right now as the only two posts are basically heavy spoilers for the gist of the AU. Unless you've already found it, then, well, I hope you like the art.

Another thing, I won't update this fic until some time in mid-May, as exams are coming up. I'm only posting this chapter so I can direct my attention to my studies. I'll do my best in it!
Chapter Summary

More meetings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“U-um, sir?”

The two had been running down a few more corridors when the little king timidly piped up. Roland slowed down. “Yeah?”

Evan was pointing towards a door on the right. “I-I think we should go that way. Nelly said this path is… off beaten? The guards wouldn’t think we would go there.”

This “Nelly” is… very prepared, Roland thought as he pushed open the door… to piles of rubble and a few cat-eared guards on the floor. So that was where the explosion happened. Ouch. “I’m afraid our enemies thought the same thing when they decided where to attack…”

“N-no!” Evan cried, rushing to the downed guards. “Please, wake up! Can you hear me?” One of them stirred, and seeing the blonde-haired, uttered a mew of relief. “Oh, King Evan…! I’m glad you’re safe… Please, escape before they find you…” “But what about you? And the others? I can’t leave you like this…” The guard managed a smile at that. “D-don’t worry about me, King Evan! I’m still a bit winded, is all. I’ll get my fellow guardsmen to safety once I feel better- but please, start running. I’m not their target- you are.”

Seeing Evan’s persisting worry, Roland stepped up. “You heard him- we should go.” He turned to the guard, who had just propped himself against the wall. “You sure you feel alright?” The guard nodded and unhitched a small bag from his belt. “Yeah. I’ve bought myself a batch of soreaway earlier, luckily, so I’ll be up and running with my fellow paws once I get them to chew a couple. Actually-” He took out a few green leaves from the bag and stuffed them into Roland’s hand. “-take a few. I don’t think I’ve seen you, but if King Evan’s here unharmed, then Lady Aranella must’ve planned for you to protect him in her place. Either way, if you feel yourself falter, chew. That’s how you soreaway your sores away. Now... go.” Tucking away the leaves in a secure pocket somewhere on his suit, Roland stood up and nudged a still worried Evan towards the exit. “Thanks.”

Oh right, Evan called him “sir”. Roland hadn’t even introduced himself. He paused and turned back.

“You’re… Evan? Right? The king?” “Yes. At least... I was, I think.” “Okay. My name’s Roland.” “Roland... I-if Nelly sent you, do you know what’s going on? Ding Dong Dell has been at peace for ages... There’s no reason for a coup.”

Ah, so that’s why the boy was so confused. “I’m sure it was, Evan. I'm not sure myself... but still waters run deep. You’d have a much harder time knowing your country when you’re its leader.” “You... seem very knowledgeable about it.” “I should know. I run a country myself.” Well, not anymore, but the point still stands. “-but we should get out of here, fast. No time for political
lectures.” He turned the corner to see, as he’d hoped, empty corridors. The mice were a bit simple-minded to keep a secluded path unguarded, weren’t they? “Let’s go.”

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They’d almost gotten outdoors when Evan gave a hushed whisper. “Roland! Soldiers, outside… Elite ones.”

Roland peeked out, and as Evan had warned him, there were red-clad soldiers standing guard next to the lines of bushes. So far, he’d only beaten guards with purple armor. “I suppose it’s best not to deal with them, right?”

Evan nodded. “Well, if Nelly was here, then…” Whoever this Nelly lady was, she certainly was someone very, very powerful. “Who’s Nelly? You and the guards keep talking about her.” He swore he saw Evan’s ears perk up at that mention. “Nelly’s our governess! She’s very strong, and awfully kind! And she knows about everything! Those guards don’t stand a chance against her!” Very, very powerful indeed. “She sounds like a great woman.” “She is!” “But we’re on our own right now, so… let’s take a different approach. Try sneaking to the bushes over there.”

Evan nodded, knelt and, soon enough, had carefully positioned himself behind the vegetation. In minutes, Roland had done the same. Thank you, gardener, whoever you are, Roland thought, for letting the plants grow tall.

“Ro-“ The blonde boy caught himself, and instead, pointed towards a door, a few more bushes away. Roland nodded, and Evan crept forward swiftly and stealthily, quickly. Almost like a cat. Roland shook his head and made his way forward…

…Only for the hem of his jacket to catch onto a stray branch, breaking it and causing a snapping sound. Shit. He could hear the guards turning around, muttering to each other about the strange noise.

“Roland!” Evan whispered, trying to make his way back. Roland raised his hand to stop the boy, then held his index finger his lips in shushing motion. He didn’t want any more noises to tip the guards off to their position.

Speaking of which, one of the lesser ranked guards had walked closer to where they were, surveying the bushes. Roland reached for his pistol. Silencer or not, he had to get rid of the-

“Luco! What the hell are you doing over there?”

The guard spun around and stood straight as he heard one of the elites call to him. “I-I thought I heard something-”

“You’re just not paying attention, are you?!” The elite guard beckoned the other over. “We heard pottery crash in the building- must be one of the Grimalkins. Come on! We’ve got a king to trap.”

“a-AYE, SIR!” The mouse guard hurried over, and quickly the batch of soldiers disappeared into the building they’ve just sneaked out of. Roland pinched between his eyebrows, heaving a sigh. If he’d been in his sixty-year-old self, he would’ve succumbed to cardiac arrest right there. Evan was still staring worriedly, so he made an “okay” sign with his hand, and together they ran towards their target and pushed open the door, sneaking inside their next step towards freedom.

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Next step towards freedom? More like next fight, Roland thought, smacking a rat guard on its head
with his sword. They’d run right into a squad of soldiers, as well as a-

“R-roland, duck!” Roland bent over right as a fireball- darn right, a fireball!- burned its way over where his head just was. The good graces above bless you, Evan, Roland continued inwardly.

However, the fight was getting tougher by the second. Evan had recovered from the shock of betrayal enough to throw a few flower pots and later swing a dropped sword at some of the lesser guards, but they were facing at least a few problems. Firstly, he was already out of ammo and Soreaway leaves picking off two elites. Secondly, he’d only picked up a sword again since forty years ago (Forty years ago! It was surreal to think one being forty years younger in the body of a young adult), and to admit that he was rusty with using a weapon was a big understatement. Thirdly, there was that damn mage, who’d throw up a barrier whenever he tried to get close and otherwise threw fireballs freely when he was trying to take out the reinforcements.

At that… he noticed the mage lower their wand, seeming a bit out of breath. A chance? He’d better take it. He rushed forward, raising his sword-

“Roland! To your right!”

He wasn’t fast enough to react, and the next moment he was on the floor, disarmed and out of breath, having just been thrown roughly into the railings. For one, the cunning mage had summoned the barrier again- that damn mage!- which made his sword not only bounce off, but bounce off quite far away. For another, an elite guard had rammed into him with a shield as tall as he was from the adjacent room, which left him quite compromised as he struggled to get up.

“Roland!” He could see from the corner Evan cry out his name, desperately locking blades with a lesser guard, but only managing to hold on.

The elite guard that took him down nodded at the mage, who walked closer and raised their wand, fire sizzling at its tip. Oh no, no no no. A second fiery demise? He didn’t want to go like that, not again, so soon after his first-

He briefly saw someone flit behind the two enemies, who crumpled instantly. Then another guard fell. And another. And then… And then everyone except Evan and their rescuer- a young lady in pink with a dagger- were on the ground.

Evan’s eyes widened with surprise and happiness.

“Nelly!”

Ah. So that’s her.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 2! I hope so far the sneaky scenes were alright.

I'm aware now that I've seen people doing playthoughts of NNK2 of the fact that Evan calls Aranella "Nella" instead of "Nelly" like what I've been using for 2 chapters now, but ah well.

On that note, I've managed to work out my tumblr blog for posting about my au art so you won't unintentionally see AU spoilers, so I can now say the url's "nnk2austuffs"! A
pretty straightforward name. I recommend accessing it on a computer.
“Sorry, Evan. I came as quickly as I could.” Aranella apologized, dusting off her hands. “To be honest, I didn’t expect you to be outside your quarters.”

Evan almost looked teary with joy. “I’m so glad you got here in time, Nelly… How’s Roland?”

“Well, he should be-“ Aranella looked at the man in question. He had just stood up, rubbing the back of his head and interjecting with a “You could ask me, you know. In any case, I feel like I’ve been given life yet again. Thank you, Miss Aranella.”

The governess surveyed the stranger in curiousity. Strange clothes, strange sidearm- all pointing to him being not from Ding Dong Dell, including the subtly fearful but polite smile he was making. “So… you’re Roland?”

Roland nodded. “Yes, that’s me. Now, you’re probably wondering how I got here.”

“He just appeared in my room in a ball of light!” Evan exclaimed. “And he saved my life. I thought he was your doing, Nelly.”

Nelly chuckled, suspicion alleviated. “Not even my magic would be strong enough to spawn an entire person into a room, Evan.” She looked around. “We should get out of here before someone notices all the people lying around. Come on, you two. We’ll find a better place to continue our introductions.”

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They seemed to have found some kind of storage room to seek temporary refuge in, and Roland took the breather to get a better understanding.

“You said you’re Evan’s governess, Miss Aranella? You seem to act as his bodyguard too.”

“Well… yes. I’m his governess and bodyguard.” Aranella nodded, holding out some sort of package to Evan, who held it carefully in his arms. “I didn’t have to do the last part until now.” Her eyebrows knitted. “And on today, too! How could they…”

“What’s going on, Nelly?” Evan huddled closer to his protectors. “Why are all these guards…”

Aranella’s eyes seemed to glint with anger. “Chancellor Mausinger’s started a rebellion. He means to kill you.”

“Mausinger?” And the look of disbelief has flown back in full force onto Evan’s face. “But he was my father’s most trusted advisor! Please, Nelly, let me go to him- I must make him see reason!”

“A coup this well planned can’t be a spur-of-the-moment action, Evan.” Roland commented. “Going to him only means you’re giving up your life: If he wants you dead, he means it.”

Evan, at that, lowered his head, silent. It must have felt terrible to be betrayed by his father’s closest advisors, but this was no time to ponder about it. Roland turned to Aranella.

“Are there any safe escape routes nearby?”
Aranella nodded immediately. “Yes. We’re near a hidden route to the sewers, so we should be able to go out of the castle through it. Few should know of it. Although…” She pointed at Roland, who blinked.

“Yes?”

“We’d best have you change into something less… conspicuous.” The governess walked to a wardrobe and opened it, looking around before tugging out a dark blue trench coat, a black undershirt and a pair of boots. She dumped those into Roland’s arms. “These shouldn’t stand out as much. The guards will think you’re one of them from far away.” A bit of staring from Roland prompted her to continue, “What? Go on.”

“Mind giving me a bit of privacy?”

“Oh. Oh, right.” She turned around, uttering a quick request for Evan to do the same. After a bit of shuffling, Roland, now in the guard’s greatcoat and holding his slightly singed suit, told them that he had finished changing.

“It suits you, Roland!” Evan exclaimed. “It’s even in just the right size.”

“You’re lucky to have one.” Aranella agreed. “The last of the humanfolk guards have resigned a few years earlier, and we’ve been keeping the last of the uniforms here. There’s a reason why I took you two here in particular. Another thing…” She took out a bangle, embedded with a few gems. “Take this with you.”

“What’s this? A… familial keepsake?”

“Not exactly, although this particular one has been passed down a few times. We call this an ‘arms band’, it’s for storing weapons.” “This?” “Yes. It’s best if we do a direct demonstration- give me your sidearm.”

With a bit of hesitation, Roland followed her direction. Holding the gun, Aranella tapped a corner of the handle against one of the gems, and with a flash, the gun disappeared. “Now, put on the ring and think about the sidearm.”

The gun appeared in his hand, heavier and in pristine condition.

“What…”?

“Magic. Replenishes ammo, keeps weapons in good shape. If you’re particularly well-tuned to magic, you’ll be able to imbue your attacks with it, although seeing you being from nowhere near Ding Dong Dell, it might take months.”

“And you can’t really lose it because it’s always on your hand… very handy.”

A moment of incredulity-charged silence from Aranella, who then sighed.

“You’re the type to joke under danger, aren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged.”

Seeing that the two had finished their short banter, Evan pushed open the door, only for Aranella to stop him, look out, and quickly push him back inside, face blanched. “W-what-“ “Shush! It’s the Black Knight.”
Roland, looking from above Evan, watched as a mouse in very heavy armor stomp past the a doorway down the corridor. As though sensing something, it turned, and through its mask with red, eerily glowing goggles, it seemed to stare right at the three. Approximately twenty thumps of Roland’s taxed heart later (again, if he had been his older self, he would’ve dropped there and then), the knight turned again and stomped off. Three exhales of relief. Aranella turned to the group, looking more tense than she had previously.

“Let’s hurry before the Black Knight checks in again.”

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The route to the secret passage was a lot more straightforward than Roland’s earlier encounters. For some reason, all the mice guards had followed very strict cycles of walking, and didn’t quite react to three people sneaking right behind them. Perhaps it was the ear guards? Thankfully, the Black Knight hadn’t turned up either.

Now that they were in the room Aranella had specified, the governess stepped towards a bookshelf.

“Give me a minute… I’ll have to reach for the switch.” She stood on her toes, reaching her hand around the top shelf. A click, and the bookshelf swung to the side, revealing a hidden stairway. Just like one of those animated movies he watched with his son, Roland thought.

They started down the secret passage, but Evan’s walking soon slowed to a crawl. He seemed to be caught up with insecurity again, so the two adults stopped and turned towards him.

“Why did Mausinger start the rebellion?” Evan muttered. “Is it because I became king?”

As Aranella stooped to comfort the boy, Roland tried to piece things together. “I doubt if the reason’s that simple…” He remembered the observation of the cat guards and the mice guards. “Miss Aranella: a question? I think I see there’s a certain… species divide between the two sides of the conflict.”

“There is. The relationships between the Grimalkins- Evan is a half-Grimalkin, you see- and the mice have never been entirely civil. King Leonhart tried his best to heal the rift between the two, but…”

A whimper from Evan. “F-father…”

“You’ll have to forgive him, Mister Roland.” Aranella continued. “He’s still very young… and the passing of his father is very raw for him.” She reached out a hand to ruffle Evan’s hair. “And… Evan. I have something to tell you. Your father… Chancellor Mausinger poisoned him.”


“Not according to Mausinger’s bodyguards.” A shadow cast over Aranella’s face. “I… finally got one of them to talk. They added it to his meals… a little at a time. To create less suspicion. The rebellion… it started some time ago.”

Seeing Evan look even more downcast, Roland knelt down as well. “I understand it’s hard to take in, but we have to keep moving. We can’t let them catch us.” Evan nodded weakly. “O-of course…”

“We’ll be out of the castle very soon, Evan.” Aranella emphasised. “Just stay on your guard. We should be safe from the soldiers, but there’s still a few monsters creeping around.”
“We’re there! That’s the-?!”

There was no bridge. Only the crumbled ruins of one,

“What is the meaning of this?” Aranella was caught off guard by this turn of events. “The bridge-it’s broken…”

Roland knelt down on the broken end, swiping soot off on one of the discarded bricks. “This was planned. An explosion- they knew we’d come this way.” So the mice were doing that weird cycle march deliberately…

At that very moment, a deep chuckling resounded from the halls behind them, then a… furret-mouse in a green robe stepped into view, flanked by mouse guards and monsters alike. On one side, there was a much stouter mouse. And on the other side of him was the Black Knight, whose eye covers glowed red as he spotted his prey.

Aranella gritted her teeth, holding her dagger out protectively. “Mausinger…!” This only made said Mausinger grin and brush his… goatee? Brush his goatee and gloat, “There you are, little king. I’m afraid I’ll have to request you to relinquish your life today.” Roland stepped forward, assuming his battle stance, but this didn’t stop Mausinger’s victory speech. “Unfortunate, I concede, but your illustrious line ends here, with your… two substitutes for parents, today.” A flick of the chancellor’s head, and the Black Knight began to march towards them.

With the intimidated tone Aranella had adopted in her brief mentions of the Knight, it was clear that the rest of the group were even less of a match for their foe. Roland’s gut sunk even further when the Black Knight visibly exuded a dark purple aura, and as his head buzzed from something (the familiarity of impending doom, yet again? Maybe, Roland thought.), the governess turned to him, determination blazing in her expression. “Take Evan, and get ready. I’ll buy you as much time as I can manage!”

Evan caught onto the undertone of her voice, fear filling his own. “Nelly?! But… but Nelly…”

The lady turned, holding onto her liege’s shoulders as she spoke in hushed whispers. The stomping from the Knight grew even louder. “You are your kingdom’s last hope, Evan! You cannot die here!” With these, she turned back towards the Knight, and the two adults nodded at each other.

The Black Knight raised its sword.

Roland ran towards Evan, and holding him in an embrace, jumped off the edge of the broken bridge.

Wind lashed at their faces and hair.

The purple aura burst out from above the ledge.

Evan cried out his governess’s nickname.

The king and the outsider fell.
Thank you for reading Chapter 3! This was originally the same chapter as 2, but since I wanted to keep the chapters consistent in terms of word count for now, I separated them into two.

I'm multi-tasking with revision and this, I promise. The exam's mostly practical, but I'll take a better look at the procedures now that my current bout of writing energy is almost cleared.
Roland heaved himself onto shore. He was glad that the currents petered out, or his stamina would start to give way. Dragging Evan onto dry ground next to him, the man rose and shook the water out of his hair, then summoned his sword, surveying around him. It was quiet, save for the sounds of running water. Doesn’t seem like there were any enemies. The sword faded from view.

“Roland, we have to go back.” Evan was kneeling on the ground, hugging a package- somehow, he had managed to hold onto the bundle Aranella had given him before they parted ways. He looked up, desperate, and his voice quavered as he pleaded, “Please, Roland, we have to go back! Nelly-she-” He was whispering now, head hung low. “Please, we can still save her…”

Roland shook his head. Goodness, Evan looked like he was going to give up any minute- it was so hard to break the truth to him. “If we go back, we’ll be captured for sure.” He grimaced. “Aranella would’ve gave her life for nothing.” At that, the half-Grimalkin’s eyes widened in mortification, and Roland felt his heart clench. “I’m afraid we have to make the worst of assumptions. So stand, Evan… We must keep moving.”

Evan’s arms tightened on the package for a few seconds, then he rose to his feet, and held out the package to Roland.

Roland blinked.

“Please… store it in your arms band.” Evan stated. “I… I don’t want to lose it.”

“Of course.”

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Together, they made their way along the path before them. The atmosphere hung, solemn, over them. Like humidity.

“…if only I was stronger, perhaps…” Evan muttered dejectedly as he ran. “Maybe… We could’ve saved her. Maybe I could’ve saved her…”

“We all have our roles, Evan. Your role isn’t to storm ahead and fight.” If they had any time to spare, Roland would’ve stopped to let the younger boy catch his breath, both physically and mentally. But they didn’t. “You are the king- you must escape. Survive. Your kingdom needs you.”

The little king went silent once more. Only the dripping sounds of water conversed between them until they neared a clearing.

“That's... A breeze?” Evan’s senses had picked up the change in wind much quicker than Roland did. “The exit- we’re close, Roland-“

A familiar black aura burnt its way in front of them, forming a barrier. They were trapped. Together, they turned around- right at the Black Knight, backed by a similar purplish line of fire. “I have you now…” The rodent knight rasped behind its helmet. Throaty laughter echoed from within it.
Well, shit.

“No way…” Evan was backing up, ears flattened against his hair. “If he’s here, then Nelly.. it can’t be!”

Flames gathered around the Black Knight’s sword. “Stay right there, little king. You’ll join her quite soon…”

He won’t let him, Roland thought. The Black Knight seemed to have the advantage in terms of magical prowess and intimidation, but as far as Roland had observed, his mobility? From the heavy armor he wore? From how the only movement he seemed to know was to march slowly forward? Terrible. That was a weakness all right, and he’d better take it from there. He sprinted forward, raising his sword and bringing it down- only for it to clang on a metal shield. Ducking, he felt the black flames raising the hairs on his neck, and moved to the left to get a hit on the knight’s sword hand, hoping to disarm the mouse as soon as he could. No such luck. The Black Knight swung his shield towards him, but as Roland had hoped, the rodent’s speed was awful. Another hit to the sword hand, and another, and beginning to circle the knight, Roland could see the knight’s grip loosen just a tad-

And he saw the shield fly in from behind him instead of in front of him. The knight outsmarted him. He could see himself flying across the battlefield once again-

No. This cannot continue. He had a king to protect. It was his role to help Evan escape. His fingers tingled, and as he swung his sword sideways in desperation, he found himself shouting a single word.

“Flatliner!”

A line of light flew against the shield, repelling the later, and a second, vertical line made the metal shield clatter onto the ground a few feet away. From behind him, Evan exclaimed something, and there was also a grunt from the knight- one of surprise. Roland spun around, and with all the strength he mustered, he smacked his sword onto the helmet of the rat. He could hear the cracking of glass- the ones covering the knight’s eyes, and the knight stumbled backwards as red splinters tinkled on the ground. For a moment, all was still.

That… That couldn’t be it. A being that could bring someone as strong as Aranella could not possibly be deterred that easily.

A throaty laugh, and purplish flames burst from the rat. Roland stumbled backwards as he watched the flames roar and grow larger, consuming the Black Knight. It almost looked as though the flames touched the ceiling itself. Was the knight trying to take them with it? He mustered his strength, and the glow from Flatliner- a skill, as his mind had named it- gathered on his sword again. He should put out these flames as soon as-

A fist struck across his head. A fist, as large as his face, struck across the side of his head and Roland registered the floor rolling violently before stopping abruptly. He couldn’t move- something had put a foot on his chest. That couldn’t be. His hand was empty. The knight couldn’t be that fast. Evan was screaming from somewhere, and as his eyes focused on the creature that had overpowered him- what the Black Knight had been hiding under his armor, Roland found himself thinking the most incredulous thought yet:

“Oh gods, that’s a rat centaur with muscles.”

Focus, Roland. He had a gun. He brought a gun to a fist fight. Right now, he was under the beast,
so wherever he could aim… He’d hit it. The gun manifested in his hand, and he aimed it upwards and fired. The bullet struck its target, and he heard a hellish scream before feeling the foot lift from his chest—only to feel it punching him hard in the side of his waist and sending him across the surface of the cave again. Wheezing for breath, he lifted his face off the floor, just as the same purplish flames that had engulfed the rat to gather around the rat-centaur’s mouth. Was it going to incinerate him?

No. The stream of fire went by him, on his left— at Evan. Evan had his back against a wall, with flames blocking his way to his left and right. There was nowhere he could possibly run.

The fire engulfed the patch of land Evan was.

Roland’s heart skipped a beat, then thundered. He brought his gun up, aimed right at the beast’s head, and fired. It may have been illumination from the purple fires that barricaded their way, but when the bullet hit home, right in the centaur’s left eye, he swore he could see, just briefly, an explosion of black and purple.

The beast squealed, stumbled backwards, toppled over the edge of the clearing, down a cliff. Two seconds. Three seconds. Five. A dull thump echoed. Roland let himself breathe.

Evan. What happened to him?

He scrambled to pick himself up, and turned around.

Evan was alive, sitting on the ground, but alive. But how? He was struggling to prop up someone. Someone in pink.

Someone had taken the flames in Evan’s stead.

Aranella.

---

It was only when Roland had lowered Aranella near the exit of the sewers, in the sunset, that he could see the harrowing state she was in. Whatever magic was used, its aim was to kill, painfully. Roland couldn’t think of any other words to put it.

The governess raised a shaky hand, taking rasping breaths. “…E…van? Evan… Where are you? I can’t… see you…”

Evan had scrambled to her side, taking the raised hand in his own ones. “I’m here, Nelly! Please, hold on—” His voice broke, just briefly, “-We’ll get you to the doctors, and they will heal you up! So please, Nelly, stay with us!”

A weak chuckle. “I- I could never replace your mother… but…” She turned in the direction of Evan’s voice. “In the time we’ve had together… I…” Haggard coughing.

Evan nodded, tears already gathering in his eyes. “I-I know! I know, Nelly-“

Aranella closed her eyes. “I wanted to live to see it… see you… grow into the ruler… I know you will be. A kingdom… with the kindest king… and-“ Coughing, harsher than before, “-The happiest subjects the world has ever seen…” Her other hand came up to clasp over Evan’s. “Please… Evan… be strong… build a kingdom where all will live… happily ever after…”

The dam broke. Tears streamed down Evan’s face. “I- I can’t do it! I can’t do it without you,
Nelly… I- I don’t know if I can…” A sob from the lonely king. “So please, Nelly…! Please don’t leave me as well! I don’t know what I can do without you!”

Aranella smiled sadly and raised her hand, attempting to reach Evan’s face. “I’m… very… very sorry… but… you’re in good hands, Evan… So…”

The hand fell, vitality abandoning it.

“Nelly?”

Evan shook the governess’ shoulders. There would be no response. The boy’s voice grew louder and more frantic, “Nelly, Nelly, NELLY, NO!” He wailed and sank his face into charred fabric.

“NELLY!”

There wasn’t anything Roland would know to help as Evan cried.

Then, voices.

“I hear voices! This way!” “Is it them?”

There wasn’t anything Roland could do but to grab Evan’s arm, and half-lead, half-drag him away from the latter’s last family.

“Nelly…”

He didn’t have the strength. Roland’s grip loosened, and Evan stumbled to a stop. The king closed his eyes, wiped his tears, and turned back towards the exit of the sewers.

Together, the king and his protector continued their escape.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 4! There will be a breather chapter for Chapter 5. I'm still pretty bad at writing fighting scenes, to be very honest. Too bad more people will get beaten up later on (/bricked)

When I saw Aranella’s sacrifice, my first thought was that "Oof, that's gonna hurt". As Ni no Kuni 2's a lighter piece, there wasn't, but I felt I might as well try writing otherwise this time. I hope I managed to do it!

I'll start posting more regularly now that the majority of exams is over, so please look forward to it!
A dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sun had fully set when they found the clearing, and the moon was all that illuminated the two as they sat down. (Smoke could give their location away.) Roland gave Evan the memento, and on uncovering its contents- a red cape and an armband, Evan had cried again, eventually settling into sleep. Upon noticing the windy, cool weather, Roland had covered his coat over Evan as a makeshift bedsheet, and now with the king slumbering, he was left to his own thoughts.

Roland’s waist still ached from his latest fight. That should be enough evidence that he was at least somewhat alive. After all, he had only just survived a rat-centaur, a fall several meters high into water, and a nuke. The nuke that had doomed his world. At that thought, he could feel his hands and face burn again- a sickly scent- he brought up his hand, surveying it to calm himself down.

That wasn’t there before.

A dark patch of skin stood out on his right index finger, where his fingerprint would be. He leaned in to get a better look. The patch was purplish black. He prodded it. It didn’t hurt. Must’ve been some kind of scar from the ghastly fire the Black Knight had manipulated, he thought, and left it at that. A sniffle from his right made him turn and look at Evan, who had turned over on his side. The blonde locks had scattered over his face. He hadn’t given it much thought, but Evan… reminded him of his son. Looked like his son, in fact. His heart tightened.

Roland settled his face in his hands. Was there any chance that his family would’ve survived the nuke? There was the fallout- the inevitable chaos- to deal with. And the backlash- of course, saying it was his fault for endangering the world was understandable, but… He let out a sigh. Was the resemblance just a coincidence? Or was this just a dream of his, created from guilt and his last remnants of a brain?

He looked up and stared at the moon. It shone silver. Oh, to hell with that. So what if it was indeed his dying dream? It was obvious he had a purpose in this. To protect the usurped king of Ding Dong Dell, and to see it through that the king could build a kingdom that befit the world. If he could help Evan do that… Even if he would pass on immediately afterwards, he’d do so with a smile.

If this were to be his redemption, so be it.

He almost felt fatigue sweeping over him immediately. Resting his head on a rock wall behind him, he closed his eyes and let his mind sink into sleep.

---

“Don’t you ever DARE let him go astray!”

Roland assessed the situation. He had just fallen asleep, but he was also sitting at a desk- why did it look so familiar?- and for some reason, a robed, hooded, masked… person in white stood in front of the desk and shouted that at him.

He looked around the room. Bookshelves in the back corner, a lamp in front of them, a window to the left; a shelf behind him with more books and boxes of tea- this was his office when he was a president all right.
If this dream resulted from the contemplation of his home earlier, he wouldn’t be surprised, but this…

He took a closer look at the person, who was still leaning forward over the desk. A pattern on mask gleamed pale green. Just beyond the edges of the hood, Roland could see a tuft of silver hair poking out from just beyond the cloth.

Roland looked up. The mystery person hadn’t moved an inch. He cleared his throat.

“Uh…?”

The person jumped back, clearly startled- and Roland could see that their hands were both shackled and holding something. Within seconds, they had their back to the bookshelves.

“Oh makers above, forgive me!” Their voice were warped, as though there were two overlapping tones, “I-I… Please excuse my behaviour…”

There was silence for a time, as the mysterious person half-cowered against the wall. Roland remembered what they had said.

“Do you know Evan?”

“Evan…? His name’s… Evan…” Hesitation. “I see… So that’s…”

It was clear that whoever this newcomer was, they were most likely freaked out of their wits. Roland sighed and turned around, taking a tea bag out of the shelf. Now, where was the electronic kettle…? Right, there.

Roland turned around, setting a cup of steaming hot tea on the desk. From the window, he could see the sky outside was dark- turbulent, even. An incoming storm, maybe? He addressed the stranger.

“Let me be clear: I don’t know you, but, well, do take a seat. Have a drink. There’s a chair just next to the desk.”

The person didn’t seem convinced. “What’s that on the table?”

“That’s tea.” The cup puffed steam into the air, and Roland enjoyed the warmth before noticing that they still haven’t moved. “Come on, it isn’t poison. Do mind that it’s hot, though.”

The scent of freshly made tea wafted through the air, and the tense posture the stranger had adapted finally loosened up- just a tad. They raised their shackled arms.

“Forgive me. My hands are… occupied.” They lowered their head. “I- I promise I’ll try it before I leave. I’ve been in the same place for so long… I need a bit of time to adapt.”

“Sure, take your t-“

He could hear wind pick up outside the window. The stranger seemed to straighten up.

“You should go.”

“What?”

“N- Evan. He’ll wake up soon.”
Roland blinked in confusion, but when he opened his eyes, he was staring at the clearing, the sky barely lighting up. On his right, Evan was still snoozing, coat and red cape draped over him.

What in the world was that about…?

As he pondered about the weird dream, the young king stirred, yawning. Roland knelt down next to him.

“Finally awake, Evan?”

Evan nodded and rubbed his eyes. “I… Yeah. I had a very strange dream…”

“You too, huh?” Roland stood up. “I’ll go walk around for a bit.” He needed to stretch- his waist didn’t ache anymore, but there was that uncomfortable tension that he wanted to sort out. There was a small route that led up to a cliff, and from there, Roland saw.

A vast horizon of blue and green, with strange rock outcrops (Or were they trees? Roland had never seen trees that big, anyway.) and mountains in the distance.

“Roland, your coat…” Evan had ran up from behind him, holding his cape and ring in one arm and the coat in the other. Roland took the latter back, uttering thanks before turning back to the scenery.

“So… I really am in a different world. There’s no view like this. No Ding Dong Dell, either.”

Evan looked at Roland, curious, “What’s it like in your world?” Roland thought and tried to piece together an answer. “It’s… ahead in some ways. Behind, in others. I’m surprised you aren’t questioning me.”

The half-Grimalkin smiled. “Nelly once told me about that when I was younger, you see. Another world- one closely connected to ours. She’d tell stories of how heroes would travel between these two worlds to save it… I ended up regarding it as just fiction as I grew older, but…” He brought a hand to his chin, thinking, “There might be some truth to it after all.”

Huh. Interesting… “So, you’re saying that I got stuck between these two worlds and… ended up here?” And more importantly, “And since you said yourself you thought it was fiction, I suppose… there’s no easy way back?”

Evan frowned. “I guess so… What did you do there, Roland?”

Was there a word in this world that was a synonym of “president”? Otherwise… It embarrassed him somewhat to say it, but- “I… was a king. Of sorts.” Evan gave a positively surprised squeak, which embarrassed him a lot more. “Well, a president. They’re kind of the same thing. We rule over places.” Wait, that’s beneficial. “Which means I can provide a bit of advice with running a country.” Nice one, Roland.

“There really? Then…” Evan looked at Roland expectantly. “Can… Can I ask you to share some of your wisdom with me? I mean, you’re from a different world, things aren’t the same, but, well… I haven’t had a lot of experience being king.”

Flattering words and puppy eyes- cat eyes or no, Roland would happily oblige. Just one more thing. “Evan, what exactly are you planning?” “Huh?” “A quiet life in the woods wouldn’t be so bad, you know.”

Evan shook his head. “No, I’ve made up my mind.” He stared forward, eyes determined. “I’ll keep my promise to Nelly. I’ll build the kingdom she hoped for- A kingdom where everyone will live
And the heavens above bless you, Evan. Roland smiled and stepped forward, watching as the sun peeked over the horizon. “Well, good for you. I’ve made up my mind too- I’ll stay here. With you, Evan.” To see it through.

The glow in the sky grew warmer, and the two companions watched for a while before setting off on their new journey.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 5! As I said, a breather episode. Can’t believe it took me what? 7? 8? thousand words to get through a single in-game act. Whoof.

Also finally, I can introduce a completely AU character! I’ve waited very long for this. I should already have concept art over on my AU blog. It's nnk2austuffs, on tumblr, if anyone’s interested.

I’ll go over some more playthroughs before starting the new act, so please sit tight and look forward to my upcoming chapters!
“So where do we go from here, Evan?”

They had sat down in the clearing again, trying to form a coherent plan in building a kingdom. However, Roland… generally had zero knowledge of where is what.

Evan brought a hand to his chin. “If I were to become king again, I’ll need to find a Kingmaker and convince them to help us.”

“Kingmaker?” From how Evan had regarded the title with much respect, Roland was sure that wasn’t just any ordinary king-making person. “Please, explain.”

“You see, a monarch must have the power to serve his people- and protect the kingdom. That’s where Kingmakers come in- they’re magical creatures blessed with great power. A single one of them is as strong as an entire army. Kings-to-be would try and prove their strength to Kingmakers, and once a Kingmaker is convinced, they will serve as both a guardian and evidence of the king’s proving. That they’re worthy to rule a nation.”

“I see.” If that was in his world, he doubted if there’d be any presidents at all. “I’m guessing that they’re big?”

“Yes!” Evan stretched out his arms in a gesture of measuring. “You should see some of them- they’re as big as an entire castle!”

“And… You mean to tame one of them? Can they even hear you from up there without you shouting?” Back on the topic, Roland. “Wait- you’re a king, right? Does that mean you already have a Kingmaker?”

“I should… But, well…” Evan frowned. “My father only died a month ago. We… haven’t quite gotten to that, so I’m not a true king yet. Yesterday would have been my ceremony in inheriting the royal Kingmaker of Ding Dong Dell if the coup didn’t happen.”

“So what happens to it now?”

“Well… If it finds Mausinger to be worthy, then it’ll serve him. Otherwise, he’ll have to look for one, just like us.”

“Let’s hope your Kingmaker isn’t a horrible judge of character.”

Evan stifled a laugh. “Maybe so.” His face grew serious again. “In any case, our first stop should be the King’s Cradle, beyond Cloudcoil Canyon- We might have a chance to meet one of the unaligned Kingmakers there.”

“The king’s cradle?” So they have to talk to a baby- Come on, Roland. Focus. “You mean, when we get there, we’ll see if any of them are free? That sounds like there might not be any.”

“Well, if the stories about our world’s history is true…” Evan stood up, fastening his red cape. It fluttered briefly in the breeze “There should be a few Kingmakers that aren’t claimed yet. I guess that’s our challenge!”
Roland stood up as well. “Well, there isn’t much to wait for. Let’s go.”

---

Normally for such a place with… such lush vegetation, Roland would expect there to be no one for miles. But that wasn’t the case, since the two had barely made ten minutes of progress before they heard a screaming of a woman. An angry scream, at that.

“Oh! What did I ever do to you, I ask?” A old-well, not that old-woman was being chased around by a airborne creature. She was flanked by… beige blobs? Beige blobs that had faces and squeaked whenever the creature zoomed by. “Oh, you dumbskull wyvern- You rotten devil of a thing, you!”

Roland turned to Evan, sword summoned in hand. “We should go help—” But the younger boy had already summoned a staff, and after muttering a word or two, he raised it.

“Aqua!”

A chain of blue orbs burst out from the tip of the staff, chasing down the wyvern and blasting it in water. Once the spray cleared, they could see the wyvern shaking its head, but still in the air. And now it was both angry and swooping down at the two.

At least it would've, if the blobby creatures hadn’t jumped on it and overweighed its wings. The wyvern screeched, unbalanced and trying to fling them off. One of them landed near their feet. Roland took a closer look. It had eyes and a mouth, also blobs but in darker color. And stubby hands and feet. And a tail. It looked… positively huggable, Roland thought, then shook his head and looked to his right, where Evan was also staring at the being, starry-eyed.

Guess they had something to agree on.

“Oi, you two!” It was the lady, and at her voice, the little beings jumped and gathered at her feet again. “You can see my little lovelies, can’t you? Why don’t you let them lend you a hand?” How, exactly? Roland thought. They didn’t seem like they knew to talk. But the wyvern had gained its bearings once again, and snarling, swooped in, axes raised. Evan ran near one of the beige beings and pointed at the wyvern. They chirruped in unison. Of course. Once they’ve disrupted the wyvern again, they could…

The blobs brought out a miniature cannon and giving a united cry, from it an entire cannonball blasted out, which hit the wyvern smack in the head before exploding. When Roland could see through the smoke, the wyvern was on the ground, limbs twitching.

Wow.

Evan ran in, plunged his sword into the wyvern, and the monster disappeared into black dust. Having slayed the monster, he turned around to the woman, who had just given the blobs pats on the head, and Roland hurried to stand next to him.

“Miss, are you alright?” The younger boy asked.

“Oh my!” She clasped her hands together, smiling. “I am, indeed! I would never have known what would’ve happened if you two lovely boys haven’t strolled by. A really close one, I say!” One of the beige blobs, the one with the red scarf, took the opportunity to sit on her hat. “I’m Martha, by the way. Auntie Martha to those I’ve taken a shine to- which definitely includes you! Now, how may I thank you…”
The blob on her hat squeaked, and she gave a hearty laugh. “My little’lun here tells me your stomachs have been growling like baby Grimalkins for the entire fight! Come on, then- we’re going to my house! It’s not too far away, I’ll fix you two something to eat!”

As Auntie Martha strolled off with the blobs, Evan and Roland listened as they walked. A second later, a growl. Two growls, actually.


“On a different topic, what are those blob things, Evan? Do they have a name?” “They’re called Higgledies! I’ve read about them in my ecology lessons. In a nutshell, they’re elements of nature that’ve gained conscience. These beige ones… I’d say they don’t have a special element, but there’s six variations in total. If you’re lucky, you might be able to see one formed from pure fire, for example.”

“By golly, why are you two dillydallying back there?” Auntie Martha’s house sure wasn’t far off. “We’re here! Come on before your legs go out on you!”

---

If seeing a Fire Higgledie was lucky, then Auntie Martha’s house was a Higgledie fan’s heaven. Higgledies chirruped as they washed plates, kept the fire going, played around- It reminded Roland of a kindergarten. Adorable. As he amused himself watching the tiny beings go, the young king conversed with the woman.

“Thank you so much for the meal, Auntie Martha!” Evan bowed. “We’ll get going.” The aunt looked concerned. “Hold up, dearie: where exactly are you going? There isn’t much to go to beyond my house except for Cloudcoil Canyon- and you know there’s nothing there but monsters and those nasty sky pirates.”

“That’s where we are going, Auntie Martha- we must go to the king’s cradle, beyond Cloudcoil Canyon.”

The two were staring each other down now. Auntie Martha cleared her throat. “Are you absolutely, positively sure?” “Absolutely, positively, yes.”

Auntie Martha clapped her hands happily. “Then bring some of my little lovelies with you! Runcible here-“ The beige Higgledie with the scarf from before jumped up in response. “-would particularly be happy to help you through the stretch.”

“Thank you! But… Uh, are you sure?” Evan stared at the Higgledie as it ran circles around its feet.

“Yes, yes! By being able to see my little lovelies, you two’ve already proved yourselves! They only show themselves to people of pure hearts, you see-“ A hearty laugh. “And as you can notice, your friend over there is absolutely enamored with the fellows. I know you two will give them much to fight for!”

Roland realized she was talking about him. “I-I’m just curious, that’s all. But thank you. They’re really strong- I’m sure they’ll be great help.”

“Wonderful! Just drop by if you have any questions about them little lovelies! Or if you just want to visit Old Martha here, that’ll be great too!” “We will! Thank you again, Auntie Martha.”

---
“Don’t mind me asking, Evan, but sky pirates? In my world, pirates only refer to those on the sea.” Roland asked as they traversed the grassy plains once more. Evan nodded, expression stern. “If you say that, you probably know what they do. Kidnap, plunder, kidnap and plunder. The ones on Cloudcoil are especially notorious- we call them the Cloud Snake. We can just only hope we don’t run into them…”

Sounds like they really wouldn’t want to run into these sky pirates, then. “Touchwood.”

Evan tilted his head, then patted a tree next to him. Runcible did the same. “Why?”

Why must his heart suffer like this?

“It’s, ah, a statement for luck.” Evan’s ears drooped at Roland’s explanation, so he quickly added a supplementary comment. “Literally doing so is optional, but I’m sure you’ve boosted our luck tenfold so let’s go while it’s in effect.”

Evan’s eyes lit up. “Alright!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 6! I thought I’d dedicate a short one to Martha, since 1. It does take up an entire mandatory cutscene and 2. While the ”nice grandma” character is well-used in games I still like them a lot. We'll get back to the proper business next chapter. And most importantly, Higgledies.

Also, I'd like to say while I'm a bit slow with replying to comments(or not replying at all, whoops), I really enjoy them! It's just that it might be awkward to respond to earlier comments when I already have the latest ones replied to. So what I want to say is that if you have anything to comment, please do!
“Come on, Roland, tell me what’s so funny! You’ve had that face for the entire way up!”

Roland turned around their newly acquired Leafbook- a surprisingly hi-tech tablet, with panels of pictures and comments on its screen- in his hands before handing it back to Evan. He was still unable to hide his very amused grin. “You say this tablet is made in… where was it again?” “Broadleaf, you mean?” “Yeah. We have something similar to this in my world, but…” Good grief, he almost let off a snork. “…If Broadleaf existed there, it’d be called… Broadface.” Evan blinked, then grinned. “That has got to be the most unfortunate name for a nation I’ve ever heard of.”

“Heh.” Roland cleared his throat. “It’s quite generous for the merchant to just give you a copy, to be honest- this should be very handy for catching up with the latest events- looking for people with talents your kingdom needs, even.” “That’s true…” Evan desummoned the tablet into his armband before looking up. The cliffs still stretched far into the sky. “We still have a lot to go before- hm?”

Runcible had slipped down from the folds of Evan’s cape and ran towards the edge of the cliff before them. Alarmed, Evan followed. “H-hey! Come back, it’s dangerous to go near them!” The Higgledie turned right, jumped over a rock, and began to chirrup as it seemed to be scrabble on the floor around it.

Roland brought his hand to his chin. “Is it… trying to dig up something?” Evan thought, then stooped as he took the rock off from the ground. There was a shining spot underneath it, which Runcible quickly took hold and pulled up a green Higgledie, which floated in the wind before landing gracefully on the rock Evan was still holding, arms on its hips.

Evan smiled as the new Higgledie chirruped. “So that’s what Runcible wanted to do. A pal of his was in need of help.” He set the rock down. “With that settled… Shall we be on our way, then?”

Runcible jumped in front of them, arms stretched in a “stop” gesture, then pointed to the other blob, who pulled out something and handed it to Evan. Roland felt a small pang of envy- why did the Higgledies all pick him?- and walked closer to see what Evan have been given. “What did you get?”

Evan held up a moldy twig. “Uh… It’s a stick.”

Roland could feel the envy leaving him. “Lucky you.”

As soon as he said that, a burst of magic came from the twig and surrounded Evan, eventually fading away into a breeze. Evan held his hand in front of him, and the breeze picked up, picking up a few pebbles into the space above his palm. “I know this feeling! A wind spell… Wind-whipper…” He commented, blown away. “I wonder what I can use here…” The wind-elemental Higgledie ran to a strange three-leaved clover- one Roland remembered seeing a few times on their journey across Cloudcoil Canyon. Evan directed the wind towards it, and the clover began spinning in increasing speed, picking up the wind itself- and forming a tornado the size of the plant, as tall as Roland was. The green Higgledie- for who Roland had finally came up with a nickname of Bob- jumped on the clover, and the wind brought him onto a higher outcrop of the cliff, from which Bob waved downwards.

“Does he… want us to do the same?” Roland mused, thinking of all the ways this could go wrong.
“I personally think we could try a safer route instead of hoping the wind will support us…” Runcible jumped onto the vortex and let it spring him up to where Bob was. Evan tilted his head. “I can try it first if you’re concerned?” “But…” “Giddy…up!” Evan had half-pounced onto wind, and with the spell acting on a larger scale, Roland could see how it worked- the vortex formed a film of air- like a bubble around the half-Grimalkin, which the wind blew gently upwards to the outcrop where the two Higgledies were waiting. Once landed, Evan bent over the edge of the outcrop, calling out to Roland to follow. Roland stepped onto the spiral of wind, letting it pick him up.

He should get used to the magics of this world, honestly.

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“We’re pretty high up now.” Roland commented, seeing the last of the rocky faces give way to a clearing. He looked around it as he stepped forward. “We should be past the canyon very soon… Thank the lucky stars we haven’t seen any sign of the sky pirates-“

“Shh!” Evan hissed, running up next to the older man. Roland quickly covered his mouth. Right, he shouldn’t tempt fate. Evan looked even more on guard now, so trusting Evan’s superior senses, he removed his hand and whispered, “What did you hear?”

“I-I don’t know. Fluttering. From all around… Like birds, but… louder?” He continued thinking. “And there was a bit of buzzing too, so it could be-“

A thing swooped in from the skies in front of them. Roland pushed Evan to the ground. It passed over them with some distance- but while Roland was mildly relieved that whatever that was hadn’t chosen to run over them right there and then, he could also see that the thing was a plane smaller than what he was used to, with wings shaped like those of birds, the propeller at its tail and painted in gaudy colours. Damn, so he had tempted fate after all.

A second plane had joined the first, and as the two mobiles circled closer and closer around Evan and Roland, the latter picked themselves up, standing back to back. They didn’t exactly have anywhere to run two without being potentially facing the full force of a flying plane.

Evan gave a shout of alarm, and Roland looked around to see an entire piece of cloth flying over them, covering their view and then felt it twisting and narrowing, bring the two tumbling to the ground.

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“Stop struggling! I swear, I’ll break yer bloody hands off if ye continue to wriggle!” Roland heard a gruff voice yell as his arms were yanked upwards. They were still ensnared in the cloth, unable to see much but both of them had at least tried to wrestle away from their captors. Tried, at least, Roland thought as he felt wood clack into place.

After a bit more of arguing- there were two men that had landed from their plane- the cloth was finally pulled away, and the sky pirates- one lanky, one burly, both dressed in colors just as gaudy as the planes were- dragged their victims to their knees, arms held in place with stocks. The other plane continued to circle around them.

The lanky one spoke first. “Yer’re brave to come a-wand’ring into these parts uninvited. That, or yer’re never heard of the Cloud Snake.”

Roland half-bluffed. “Nah, haven’t heard of that. Not from these parts. Who the hell are you anyway?”
“Har! This fellow says he ain’t never heard of us!” The pirates laughed for a bit, before the lanky one spoke up again. “I’m Khunbish. Him over-err is Chingis. Yer’ll remember our names as the last ones yer’ll ever hear of in yer life!”

“Excuse me!” Evan countered. “We have important business beyond this valley! You must simply let us pass!”

The gruffer pirate- Chingis snorted. “Oh, must we now? Now listen ‘ere, fella, we’ll tell yer what we simply must do: string up all them as comes a-spying on our secret base!” Khunbish nodded, “Aye, me honoured colleague has the right o’it. Yer’ve contravened the Pi-ratical Aviator’s Code… aye, Section D, Rule 7! Yer punishment is death!”

“Hold it!” Roland raised a metaphorical hand. “Now listen here: We have no aviator license. We walked here.” Evan nodded in agreement, but the two pirates clearly had the upper hand.

“Spare us yer clever words, mister!” Khunbish snarled. “Yer’ll not wheedle yer way out of this!” He took out a crossbow, pointing it at Roland’s head. Chingis followed, pointing his at Evan. “Aye, pirating’s busy work! We ain’t got no time for yer. So say yer goodbyes- Twas nice to make yer acquaintance-“

“OI-!” The other plane swooped over the four. The two sky pirates looked at each other, audibly gulping and dropping their crossbows. Taking a roll and a flip, the plane masterfully turned around, and a person jumped down from it- a girl?! Roland watched in shock as she landed perfectly from the height she had been at, eyebrows furrowed angrily and twirled around to face the sky pirates. She was dressed like the pirates, fur cape and all- but there was an aura of authority that Roland could sense, despite how close in age she looked to Evan.

“Now what d’yer think yer’re doing?” She shouted. “Taking the law into yer own hands? The Boss’ll love that!

Chingis gulped again. “Er… Miss Tani… We… we, er…” Khunbish flailed a bit, answering, “We were just scaring them, that’s all! Asserting our dominance around these parts-“

“Yer think I’d believe that?” Tani put her hands on her hips. “I’ll take a guess: yer’re wanting to play judge, jury and executioner, then drag their bodies back for yer reward! Go on, I dare yer to deny it!”

Khunbish was at a loss for words, so Tani continued, “I thought as much! Now go take them back to base, it’s Batu’s decision on what to do with them, not you. You don’t want me to tell him you’ve forgotten who’s in charge, do you now?”

The two men could only muster a weak “Yes, miss.” before going around to yank Roland and Evan to their feet. “Come on.”

“You better let me see that they’re alive when I get back- I’ll scout around for a bit more.” Tani huffed. “This and them damned wyverns on the prowl…”

Evan spoke up. “Uh… M-miss Tani?”

Tani turned around, and seeing the boy, smiled and walked to him, stooping so they can see face-to-face. “Now don’t you worry. The boss’s a reasonable man- most of the time. I know him best- he’s my dad after all!” She straightened up and addressed the two sky pirates, who were still wringing their hands. “Take the lot away, you two.”
Thank you for reading chapter 7! With this, I've hit the 10k wordcount cornerstone. Here's to further word limits!

I felt I'd question how well webs work in trapping people, since our protagonists can easily cut their way out with their swords and all, so I came up with this alternate trap thing: It basically is designed to wrap around its victims like a candy wrapper. Also, I'm quite sure I broke the 4th wall somewhere, but trust me: I'm sure Roland's world would come up with a similar name for social networks.

And honestly, T-posing would be way better than verbally scaring people.
“Come on, walk this way, ye dogs!” Khunbish hissed before walking up the rocky passage into the Sky Pirates’ den—through the entrance, Roland could a rustic-looking settlement, with wooden houses with spiky ornaments built right on the edges of a few cliffs. Evan nudged closer to Roland as they paced. “I’ve been trying…but I can’t seem to get my hands free…” Roland looked around at the pirate that had poked his head out from the gate, then at Khunbish and Chingis, who was staring back. “Then don’t!” He whispered. “They’re watching us like hawks.”

Once passed through the wooden fortifications, Khunbish turned around just as the two scooted away from each other. “Listen ’ere- make one wrong move in the Cloud Snake’s base, and we’ll kick ye off the cliffs quicker than ye can spit! Yar-har!” Once the lean pirate had turned, Evan moved back to Roland’s side. “Batu, the Cloud Snake… I wonder what kind of person he is…” From Tani’s narrative, Batu seemed like he’d be alright… most of the time. “Not all bad, if we’re lucky. His daughter seemed to think he had a reasonable side.” Most likely because she was his daughter, but he shouldn’t say such jaded things.

The trail became narrower, and they had to go in single file. Evan kept close. “Hey, Roland… What do you think they’ll do?” “I don’t know. We’ve done nothing wrong. Nothing to be afraid of.” He caught sight of a group of pirates, men and women in a circle, seemingly having a conversation. “I wonder what Batu looks like, though.”

The crowd parted as Khunbish walked closer. “That our trespassers, aye?” One said. “Aye.” Khunbish answered. A pirate with a greying beard stomped closer, giving the two a look over. Khunbish stood close. “Aye, I’m here to report in to our boss. Where’s he when I need’im…?” He glanced past Roland and Evan, and patted the shoulder of the pirate he just talked to. “Oi, I says, matey.” The group moved further back, and the two not-exactly-trepassers turned around to face a very burly man, with bandana, an impressive fang necklace, and equally impressive beard and eyebrows. “Ye must be the trespassers. Loiter’ in Cloudcoil Canyon, or so I hears it.” And an low, if not a bit intimidating voice. He turned to Khunbish. “Gads, Khunbish, did I not tell ye not to take in so many people? We’re already up to our necks dealing with them wyvs…”

Roland raised his hand—well, hands, considering they were still bound. “Uh, are you… Batu?” Batu stared down at him. “Ye, that’s me.” “Please, hear us out. We had good reason to pass through here,” “W-we only wanted to get to the king’s cradle!” Evan added, “We won’t cause any trouble! I pledge it!” Batu put his hands onto his hips, giving a huff. “Ye did cause trouble the moment ye set foot on sky pirate territory, lad. That’s a death penalty by the Code.” He continued on as Evan gasped. “No exceptions. Ye’ll be dashed on the rocks at the bottom o’ the Canyon, just like all that came before you. The Code must be followed. The carrion crows must be fed.”

Aye, this wasn’t going as well as he’d hoped. “You might want to reconsider, mister Batu. This is King Evan of Ding Dong Dell. You, as the leader of pirates, should know what happens if you execute a royal.” Batu frowned, intrigued. “Eh? Ye’re a wry one to jest so in the face o’ death, matey.” The Cloud Snake looked at Evan, who nodded. “We’re not so backward to not hear that the little prince’s taken the throne… But we’re not so dumb to think that he’d tramp all the way up ‘ere, neither.” Ah, so he’d never heard of the coup? “There was a coup in Ding Dong Dell. We escaped with our lives.”

Batu’s frown intensified, but Khunbish stepped forward. “Beggin’ yer pardon, Boss. There’s news
on the wind o’ some such devilry. Might just be some scrap o’ truth in this tall tale.” Batu crossed his arms. “Is that so?” Aye, thank ye, Khunbish. “All the more reason to toss ‘em off ’nd be done with it.” He huffed. “Whoever’s down in Ding’ong’ell will sure be happy to hear of the news. ‘D do no harm to be on their good side.” Aye, damn ye, Khunbish. Seeing no other option, Evan tried. “Please, mister Batu, recons-“ Batu held up his hand. “Do not. We’ll-“ “BOSS!”

A sky pirate ran into the settlement, hollering. Batu spun around, somewhat miffed. “WHAT?”

The newcomer- Chingis, Roland recognised- yelled as loudly as he could. “TANI! THE WYVERNS’ TAKEN HER HOSTAGE!”

The entire crew of sky pirates half-filed, half-ran down the passageway. Roland and Evan listened as they yelled at each other.

Chingis continued, “They say they’ll only let ‘er live if we up sticks right away ‘nd ne’er come back! W-what do we do, Boss?” Batu was fuming, “The devils! Pick on a slip of a girl, ‘ld they…” The grey-bearded pirate spoke up. “I say we pick some of our elites ‘nd go to rescue her right away!” Batu growled and shook his head. “Nay, the lousy lizards’d come by and slaughter every last man, woman and child if our defences run thin! And we can NOT desert our base- where else can we rebuild our home? That won’t do…” Strength left him and his head stooped. “She may be me only daughter… but… the needs of one can’t outweigh the many.” Another pirate stepped forward. “But, Boss, she’s-“ “She’s blood o’ my blood, what she is. If the boot were on the other foot, I know she’d do the same.”

“But you can’t just leave her to die!” Evan had finally had enough of it, and standing up, he walked down the narrow path. “If all of you aren’t willing to do it, I will! I will rescue her!”

His anger flaring up again, Batu glared at him, growling. “And take yer chances to escape? I’ll have none of it!”

Evan glared back. “Tani saved our lives! We are honor-bound to repay the debt! We will not run away! You have my word as-“ He closed his eyes and took a breath. “You have my word!”

Batu’s posture seemed to soften- in the very least, he looked tired now. “Just what are you plotting, laddie? I don’t have the time for yer trickery.” “It’s not trickery, I swear! But…” Evan’s hands curled into fists. “I have to live. I have to become a king again. I have to build a kingdom where everyone can be happy!”

Batu shook his head. “Ye had yer chance at being king, lad- and ye made a right pig’s ear o’ it! Ran away up here with yer tail ‘tween yer legs, did you not?” Evan, confidence taken down a notch, drooped, prompting Batu to continue, “These blighted lands are rife with misery and war. Has been for the last few centuries. No one’s gonna build a happy realm round here any time soon. Especially not some lily-livered little princeling who’s mislaid his crown!”

Evan found determination. “Then I’ll be the one to end this misery and war! I’ll unite all the kingdoms in peace!” This brought Batu out of his arm-crossing. He took a closer look at Evan, “Did I hear that right? Not only a king, but THE king of the whole blessed world, eh, lad?” Evan nodded. “If that’s what it takes, then I will try! And I can’t stop trying until everyone’s able to live happily ever after! So I can’t let it end here!”

The pirates erupted in laughter, and Roland grimaced. He can’t exactly blame them for being more of the cynical kind, but this… Bullying someone for their ideals? Unacceptable. Never acceptable. He started towards one of the pirates. The shackles should be hard enough to make some impact on their heads-
“Silence, ye mangy curs!” With a single sentence, Batu had once again asserted that he was indeed the boss around the canyon. He stared down Evan again. “You were saying?”

Evan took a deep breath. “If I can’t repay my debt to Tani, I don’t deserve to be king. I don’t deserve to live! So kill us if you must! But at least give us a chance to save her first! If we do… please, grant us safe passage to the king’s cradle.” Roland nodded inwardly. Good going, Evan.

Batu growled for a few seconds, then chortled. “So that’s ye game, eh? Very well, sunshine, ye got yerself a deal.” He turned to Khunbish. “Go on and relieve ‘em of their stocks.”

Evan gave a breath of relief as two sets of wood clacked onto the ground. “Thank you, Batu…”

Batu raised his hand again. “Do not. Ye’re still on death sentence until Tani is back, safe and sound. Chingis will see ye go to the Wyverns’ Den- he’ll take ye to it, in fact. On foot. While ye’re there, make sure to bring down more of them wyverns, ye hear? That’ll be yer proving to us of your strength to be king. Now go before I change my mind.” He turned around to issue commands to the pirates, who each ran off to fortify their base’s defences.

Chingis walked to them. “Ye hear ‘im alright, don’t ye? We must hurry.” He strode off into the canyon.

“Y-yes!” Evan stretched his arms, followed after him. Roland did the same, at which Evan turned to him, smiling, “Tani was right- he is reasonable!” Roland nodded, “We must focus on saving Tani, then. Can’t break our promise, can we?” “Of course not!”

Roland watched Evan as the latter strode up to Chingis, asking him about the whereabouts of the den.

He’d always been convinced of Evan’s resolve to build the kingdom of peace, but hearing him speak to Batu with such conviction…

Evan would be an amazing king.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 8! 2 chapters: I'm kinda on a roll today. I think I might try to speed it up a tad- I'm eager to get to the bit with the king's cradle, since the rest of the crew is kinda stuck hanging around while Evan's gone. As a side note, you should see how many times I typed Chingis as Chingish, good god.

As I have mentioned in the comments in the last chapter, we're stuck in a bit of a story that is basically the in-game plot, mostly because it is pretty fast-moving. I can't exactly put the AU in it with the wiggle space it gives. So please, sit tight while I barge through these bits! Hopefully, my writing's good enough to keep y'all entertained.
The three could see wyverns flying overhead in the direction of the Sky Pirates’ base as they made their way along the canyon. From the numbers they have estimated, it would be quite the fight back there.

“I hope they’re all right…” Evan worried. “Ye’ve got nothin’ to worry about other than how ye’re supposed to save Miss Tani, lad.” Chingis chuckled. “We ain’t called pirates for nuthin’. So what plan have ye got?”

“We don’t know what the Wyverns’ den looks like.” Roland commented. “I’m sure their defences would be a lot weaker with all the mooks they’ve sent out, but we need to get a look at the location of it so we can make as effective the plan as possible. For example, if we had a spot to sneak in-”

“Nay.” Chingis shook his head. “The den’s smack in a corner of the valley. Cliffs hugging it tight like it was some sort o’ baby, bah. One way in, one way out.”

Evan brought a hand to his chin. “So we have to face them head-on… Chingis, do you know how they usually keep their prisoners?” Chingis huffed, thinking before answering, “Them num’skulls probably string ‘em up somewhere. Stow them ‘way so no one’ll get to them without getting through the band o’ wyvs.”

Runcible and Bob peeked out from the folds of Evan’s cape. Roland and Evan looked at them, then at each other.

“We’ve got an idea.”

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“So let me run this over again- ye mean to rely on creatures that I can’t see to get yer job done? I’m being right serious: are ye mad in the head or not-”

A blast of wind blew Chingis’ hat off, and Evan caught it before Bob let it fly away again. “Yes. We’ll try to take down as many wyverns as we can while they try to free Tani- and if we beat them up before that happens, we’ll save her just the same. It’s just a matter of time, really.”

They were at the entrance of the den now, and Chingis stopped. “Fine. Ye two go in and do yer thing. I’ll stay outside.” Roland frowned at that, feeling a bit annoyed. “Not going to put in a extra bit of help?” Chingis took out an axe. “Ye a numskull like the wyverns? I’m going to stand outside ‘nd guard for ye two! Can’t let any of them get in the den when they retreat and come back.” Chingis was right- enemy backup would impede their progress, Roland thought, so he nodded. “For victory, Chingis.” “Same to ye.”

The entrance led into a narrow, dark tunnel, and Roland grimaced. At least it looked like a straight path, so he would hope to see no ambushes. “I hope you’re not claustrophobic, Evan.” Evan raised his hands in denial. “I’m not, thankfully. They probably kept Tani further in the den.”

They walked a short distance, then Roland felt something on his left shoulder and froze. Oh gods, he sure hoped it wasn’t some sort of insect… “…Evan!” He hissed, and Evan turned around. “Roland, what’s…” Roland pointed at his shoulder where the thing was, taking care to not make any large movements. Unfortunately, the motion was enough for the thing to start climbing up his neck,
and he stopped himself from yelling.

A few moments passed, and the thing seemed to have settled on the top of his head. Roland was sweating— from the humidity of the tunnel, surely, and Evan brought out his staff. “Light!” He whispered, and the staff shone. Immediately, the young king chuckled. “That’s a Higgledie, Roland.”

Roland brought his hand to his head and brought the new Higgledie down to take a better look. It was purple in coloration— a Gravity-based Higgledie, according to Auntie Martha. It did a peekaboo gesture and giggled. “Seems to have taken quite a liking to you.” Evan smiled, walking closer to Roland. The latter was not impressed. “Almost gave me a heart attack too, at that.” The older man set the Higgledie— nicknamed Toby— back on his left shoulder. “Come on, we’ve spent enough time here.”

They could see a surprisingly well-illuminated chamber on the other end of the tunnel, so Evan set down Runcible and Bob. Roland tried to do the same for Toby, but the Higgledie was practically glued to his coat. “I guess two’ll have to do…” Roland muttered, as the other Higgledies ran out into the chamber and beyond it. Nothing seemed to occur, so the two stepped into the light.

It was a circular room of sorts, with a gate barring the other end. Of course, this did nothing to deter the tiny Higgledies, who simply made their way under it.

“There’s no one here…?” Evan questioned, then looked up. “Ah, there they are.” The wyverns stood on rocky outcrops above them, jeering and clanging their axes. The largest of them all— one with bright-red mane and a gold mask, jumped down and hissed. “What bringsss you here, hm?” “We’re here to save Tani!” Evan’s answer brought the wyvern leader to cackle. “Kree hee hee! The pirate girl? You don’t look like sssky pirates, pinksskin!” Gods, the hissing was annoying. “Too… ssssmall and ssucculent.” The wyvern brandished its axes. “Cloudcoil belongsss to us wyverns, yes! You have no busssiness here!”

The lesser wyverns above them hissed in unison. “Leave thisss place! Leave thisssss place!”

Evan summoned his sword. “We are not leaving without Tani!” Roland nodded, summoning his own. “If this weren’t our business before, it is now!” The wyvern leader cackled again. “You’ll regret thisss! Come, my brethren!” The monsters that were hanging around above them flew together and joined by their alpha, the group almost covered the ceiling.

That was going to be a lot of wyverns to deal with.

A buzzing sound started up next to Roland’s left ear, and he turned to see Toby, still sitting on his shoulder, raise a stubbly hand. Its expression, as fuzzy as it was, looked positively bored. A small purple orb gathered in its hand, and as Toby pointed it at the wyverns above them, the orb floated up lazily…

…Then expanded into a bubble of purple aura that engulfed the entire group of monsters. In an instant, it crashed down, revealing an entire pile of monster dust and as it blew away, the leader, writhing on the ground. Roland managed to stop gaping and looked at Toby, who seemed to yawn.

“Good grief, Toby, you’re awesome.”

The leader picked itself up, snarling. “How… How dare you sssslay my brethren!” It brandished its axes, wobbling. “I… I will—”

It froze, then fell forward. Roland and Evan could briefly see an arrow sticking out from its maned
head before the body collapsed into dust as well. Behind it was Tani, carrying a bow, flanked by two jumping, cheering Higgledies. She lowered it, scoffing.

“You were saying?”

Echoes of stomping came from the tunnel behind them, and Chingis burst into the chamber, flinging his axe.

“Don’t ye worry, boys! Chingis is ‘ere to the…. Huh?”

After a few awkward moments of silence, Tani sighed and walked over, patting the sky pirate’s shoulder.

“We’re done ‘ere, Chingis. Let’s go home.” She turned to the other two people. “I have to thank you, er…?” Right, they haven’t introduced themselves. “I’m Evan.” “I’m Roland.”

“Evan and Roland, eh? I didn’t have either of you down as the reckless type. Or the extremely powerful type.” Tani put a hand at her hip. “Anyway… Why did the grizzled old coward send a little boy like you and two Higgledies to my rescue?” “…’little boy’?” Evan looked a bit offended. “You can’t be much older than me!” Chingis scratched his head as he joined the conversation. “They struck a deal with the Boss, Miss Tani. We’re to grant them safe passage to the king’s cradle if they could save you.”

Tani laughed, “He said that? Ha! Knew he’d see somethin’ in you. You’ve got that ol’ twinkle in your eye, too! Like you can both see something else that no one can…” She shook her head. “Well, come on, then. You’ll be at the king’s cradle before you can say ‘jiffy’!”

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“HEY-! I’m home-!”

The sky pirates’ base rustled, the residents having just dusted off their settlement. “Tani?” “Oi, Miss Tani’s back!” “And so she is!”

The Cloud Snake’s daughter marched up the walkway to where Batu and the other pirates have gathered. “Back safe and sound, Boss!” “Aye,” Batu responded. “Went an’ got yerself captured, girlie?” Tani grinned sheepishly. “Yes, boss! Sorry, boss!”

Nodding, Batu turned to Evan. “Evan, lad! Ye were as good as your word, so I shall be as good as mine- You may pass safely through the canyon.” “Thank you, Chief Batu!” Evan turned to Roland. “Now we’re a step closer to the king’s cradle!”

“Now hold on just a second.” Tani said, hands on hips. “You’re real serious about going- what are you going to do all the way up there?” Batu grinned. “Ye didn’t hear? This lad here’s gonna go hook himself a Kingmaker and become king o’ the whole wide world!” “Blimey…” Tani raised her eyebrows. “You have quite the big idea for such a pipsqueak, eh? Well, you’ll end up getting lost if you go on your own, so I’m coming with you!”

It was Batu’s turn to raise his eyebrows. “You are?! And what need have ye to go traipsin’ to yer doom with these sorry swabs, now girlie?” Tani shrugged, grinning, “Ha! You’re the one to tell me I can do whatever, whenever! And right now, this is what I want to do, and I’ll do it, so there!” She ignored Batu’s facepalm as she smiled at Evan. “Well, I hope you don’t mind me tagging along… not that you have a choice! I’ll wait for you down where the birdmobiles are at.” Walking past Batu- who still had his palm on his forehead- Tani ran down the stairs.
Roland tapped on the chief’s shoulder as he passed the latter, understanding the stress of being a dad. “We’ll… er, make sure Tani doesn’t run into more trouble.” Batu groaned, probably regretting his teachings, but nodded. “Ye better.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 9! Tove the Tenebrous is overpowered and I won't hesitate to use that as an excuse to skip an entire fight, haha. But we finally are over with the tight spot of this act! We'll have a bit of time to go into some other things while Evan's taking the examination.

You might have noticed I've been having Roland put quite a bit of focus on hearts and whatnot, and I promise, I'll get to that. When the quests show up in the game, which will be a while before I get there, but I have stuff in store already.
Seeing a birdmobile in action was one thing—being in a birdmobile was entirely different. Sitting behind Khunbish, Roland gripped the edges of his seat as it flitted over water, nimble like an actual bird.

“With all the cheek ye’ve shown me back in Cloudcoil, I sure don’t expect ye to be scared of flying, Roland.” Khunbish joked. Roland coughed, mostly with embarrassment. “I’ve been in planes before—just… not in ones with designs as open as these.” He turned to the other birdmobile where Tani and Evan were and called out, “Evan! What did Batu tell you before we left?”

The young king shouted over the fluttering of the engines. “Nothing much! He just warned us to keep Tani safe or he’ll have our hides!” Khunbish and Tani hollered with mirth. “That’s good ol’ Boss as we know him!” The lanky sky pirate steered the machine before pointing at an island in the distance. “Aye, look o’er there, lad. That’s the king’s cradle.”

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The king’s cradle was a long set of stairs leading up to a building, decorated with a tower-like structure. Yet again, Roland thanked the forces above that he wasn’t brought in here in his older state.

“Ye all go on.” Khunbish leaned back on the planes. “I’ll keep watch over these beauties.”

Thanking the sky pirate, the three made their long—very, very long way up the stairs. Once at the top of it, they stood briefly to catch their breath.

“Blimey…” Tani wiped sweat off her forehead. “What exactly did they think of when they put these stairs here? Torture?” Evan laughed, although there wasn’t a lot of humor in it. “Perhaps they wanted to test a potential king’s physical strength?” Tani huffed at the suggestion. “No wonder Dad always warned me that no one ever got back from the cradle unscathed! They probably pulled a muscle or two just walking up these bloody stairs.”

Roland pushed open the doors, feeling a cool breeze from inside it. Thank the designers that they didn’t forget to not make the building stuffy. “So this is where we get our Kingmaker, yes?”

The three filed inside, and Evan commented. “Yes, if I prove myself worthy.” He stopped in front of a statue of a dragon winding around an orb. “I guess this is where it happens…?”

The plaque in front of the statue shone, and the eyes of the dragon glowed green. A baritone voice came from within the dragon. Roland honestly expected it at this point.

“WANDERER! SEEkest THOU TO PROVE YOURSELF A KING?”

Evan stepped forward. “I do! My name is Evan Pettiwhisker, of the house of Tildrum. I have come to form a pact with one of the great guardians!”

“VERY WELL! THE TRIALS OF- HRM?” The voice stuttered. “HAST THOU NOT ALREADY ACQUIRED A KINGMAKER?”
“O-oh?” Evan tilted his head. “Do you perhaps mean Oakenhart? It has aligned with a mousekind called Mausinger, most likely.”

“I-I SEE… AHEM. VERY WELL.” A blue magical sigil appeared on the ground behind the three. “LEAVE THY COMPANIONS BEHIND YOU, AND STEP INTO THE PORTAL. THE TRIALS OF WISDOM AND COURAGE AWAIT.”

“Blimey…” Tani observed the swirling patterns in the sigil. “I guess this really is your time of proving, Evan. Good luck, buddy.”

Roland patted Evan on his shoulder. “You can do this. I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

Evan nodded. “Thank you. I’ll see you in a bit.” He stepped into the portal, and in a flash of light, he disappeared.

Tani waited for a bit. “So… what about us?”

The statue spoke again. “THOU CAN LEAVE.”

“Are ye bloody kidding me?” Resentment of stairs finally boiling over, Tani yelled at the statue. “Ye mean I went up these bloody stairs to stand around for exactly one minute, ‘nd now I have to go down, AND up these stairs all over again when we come back to pick Evan up?”

“U-UH, I DO NOT MEAN THAT. THOU MAY WAIT OUTSIDE. I WILL SUMMON THEE TO THY KING-TO-BE’S SIDE WHEN HIS TRIALS ARE OVER.”

Roland chuckled and put a hand on Tani’s shoulder. “Come on.”

---

They sat down outside on the top of the stairs. Toby took the chance to snooze on Roland’s lap.

“Well, we don’t have a lot to do.” Tani put her chin on her hand. “You got anything to ask? I’ll be glad to answer any that I can.”

Roland thought for a while. “Yes, actually. Do you know about the history of… well, this world? Batu mentioned this world has been plagued by wars in the last few centuries.”

“I do.” Tani tapped her chin. “We sky pirates all do, really. It’s why we are as is.”

“Do go on.”

“The world was a relatively peaceful place ‘til a few centuries ago. You know, the usual war, inside war, coups, the like. Nations began to crumble one by one- and it got so bad people began to have to run away to avoid the suffering.” Tani stretched. “That’s where we sky pirates came in. When all the runaways gathered together, they found a place to settle- ‘nd while we were only pirates by name at first, people began to be able to build birdmobiles. From there, we truly began to make a living as sky pirates.” She looked at Roland. “What? You look like the world’s dropped a rock on you.”

“No… It’s nothing.” Roland coughed. “So you were…?”

Tani laughed. “Nay, I’m one born n’ raised among the Sky Pirates. But all of us o’ the sky pirates all know of our legacy- let it be us, or our parents, or our grandpars, or… well, you get the idea. Whether a sky pirate’s newly joined, or have been there because of a war decades ago, they know why they’re there. That’s why we’ve formed the tight-knit family we are.” She closed her eyes, then
pointed at Roland. “Blimey, that’s a lot of talk I did. Your turn.” “Huh?”

“Your turn to talk about yourself. How you came to help the lil’ lad Evan out. You don’t seem to be from ’round here, after all.” Oof, she’s not gonna believe a single bit of it, Roland thought. He coughed.

“I’m… a king. From another world.” Tani’s eyes widened, but she quickly waved her hand to let Roland continue. “Was, really. We’d formed an cooperative agreement with other nations since a while ago, but… let’s say it started to fall apart after I became king. As one of the leading nations, to take responsibility and give a better chance for the nations to improve the agreement, I would step down from the king’s throne.” He sighed. “But my decision to do that only shook the relations between countries even more, and when I tried to defuse the situation…” He crossed his arms. “My nation was attacked. Destroyed in an instant. I’m only alive because I got teleported here- By sheer chance, most likely.”


Roland shrugged. Toby curled up and yawned. “That’s a thing of the past now- it’s not like I can go back. The first person I met when I arrived was Evan, who was just caught up in the coup in Ding Dong Dell. So when we escaped and Evan pledged that he would build the kingdom where everyone could be happy, I decided to dedicate myself to helping him. To help him avoid the mistakes I made.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching Khunbish checking on the birdmobiles at the base of the stairs.

“Our conversation took a quick turn for the depressing, ain’t it?” Tani laughed. “You know what, I’ll make a point to welcome you among the sky pirates on the rare chance Evan fails.”

“He won’t. I’ll personally make sure he doesn’t.”

“Keep your hair on, Roland. That’s why I said ‘rare’. I’m rooting for Evan too, y’know.” Tani smiled. “We sky pirates all will be. The world’s been filled with misery for way too long as it is- we’re tired of it, ‘nd I’m sure everyone else is. If taking over the world is what it takes to make it better, we’ll be glad to back it.”

Oh. “On Evan’s behalf, thank you, Tani.” “Don’t think of it. We’ll see how Evan does first-“

“EXCUSE ME?”

Both of them jumped up as the voice of the statue spoke in their minds. Toby squeaked, and flew to sit on Roland’s shoulder, chirruping angrily.

“EVAN PETTIWHISKER OF THE TILDRUM HOUSE HAS PASSED HIS TRIALS. DOST THOU WISH TO STAND WITNESS TO HIS PACT-FORMING CEREMONY?”

“Yeah, duh.” “Of course.”

“VERY WELL. I SHALL TAKE THEE TO HIS LOCATION POSTHASTE.”

The same blue sigils that teleported Evan appeared under them, and they found themselves in a coliseum-looking place. In front of them was the young king, who turned around at the sound, smiling. “Evan!” Tani grinned. “You did it!” “Yes, I did!” Evan nodded.

The statue appeared in front of them, taking center stage. It looked a lot larger than it had back in
the building. “EVAN PETTIWHISKER TILDRUM. THOU HAST PROVEN THYSELF WORTHY. A KINGMAKER SHALL BE THINE.”

A much grander sigil encircled the statue. A pillar of blue light rose at its edges, forming a huge golden sphere in the sky. It fell to pieces, and the three watched, expecting their Kingmaker to rise from within it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 10! I've always been curious about what happened while Evan was gone, so I thought I'd take this chance to do a bit of headcanons and filler, that kind of thing. Everything happens of a reason, after all. And a bit of delving into the Roland in my fic since it's the best chance I can talk about his backstory.

I guess the flight of stairs' exactly why there isn't a trial of power: it takes strength to get up those damn stairs.
Nothing fell. The three looked around. Still nothing.

“Oi!”

Evan looked at Tani, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Did you say anything, Tani?” “No! So… where is this Kingmaker?”

“Oi! Down by yur, mun!”

They all looked down to see a tiny creature with a yellow, stubbly head, red body and yellow stubbly limbs. It reminded Roland of…

“What’s… with this little guy?” The older man wondered. “An evolved Higgledie?”

The Higgledie lookalike jumped up. “Oh, that’s charming, that is! A Higgledie, indeed! I’m yer flippin’ kingmaker, en’t I!” The Kingmaker(?) stomped its feet on the floor. “Cor, you lot don’t half know how to hurt a bloke’s feelings!”

Evan stooped to look. “So… you’re my Kingmaker?” “That I am, sunshine! Name’s Lofty. You’re lucky to find yourself a Kingmaker of the old kind!” Tani join in the Lofty starefest. “What’d you mean?”

“Yoy, you don’t know? I’m one of the rare ancient ones that can communicate! The newer generation can only meow or grunt and all that jazz.”

Tani looked at Roland, scratching her chin, unsure. “So… I guess Evan passed with… flying colors…?” Roland crossed his arms. “Well, Evan can be a king again now, right? That’s what’s important.” “The dude over there’s got it right!” Lofty turned to Evan, grinning. “You have my full permission to rule over an entire realm of your very own!”

“Um…” Evan chuckled. “Thank you. I’m sorry if I seem ungrateful- It’s… the thing you came out was really big- I thought there’d be someone… grander?” Lofty faked clutching his… chest? “Cor, stab me right in the chest, won’t you? The nerve! I’ll have you know I can look mighty grand when I’ve a mind to! Just not right now, but… you better look forward to it!” He glanced at the statue, who did not say anything. “Well, best if we make ouer bond official! You got anything on you we can make a pact over? It’ll be a sacred treasure of yourer kingdom, so don’t go givn’ me some monster-blood-caked weapon or anything like that, you hear?”

“Um…” Evan searched himself. “I guess all of my weapons won’t do… Hm…” He pulled out his arms ring, taking things out of it. Materials, more weapons, soreaways fell on a pile next to him. Lofty clicked his tongue. “Ay, come on, mun! I haven’t got all day!”

"Aha!"

The young king held up a moldy stick- the one Bob gifted. Roland held back a snort. “How’d this do?” “Right tidy, mun! Now- Wait!” Lofty held up a hand. “Hang on! Hang! On! He wants to make a sacred bond over a branch! A flippin’ twig! Youer a one, you are!” He sighed and relented. “Well, can’t be helped, I s’pose. It does look sturdy, at least… Come on. Hold it ouer here. Hold up your
Evan followed Lofty’s instruction and closed his eyes. A gentle gold glow surrounded Evan, forming intricate threads of light that spiralled from his hand, up the stick and towards Lofty. “There’s beautiful!” The Kingmaker closed his eyes as well. “My turn…” The imp’s body glowed as well—this time, a warm red glow—with the same threads of light that spun towards Evan’s when he held his hands up. As the two met, a speck of light sparked—two—then the two strands melded into one. An aura of light enveloped them both briefly, then faded away.

“And… that’s us joined forever!” Lofty cheered. “I now pronounce us king and kingmaker! May the kingsbond that binds us remain thick and lustrous till death do us part!”

“It… doesn’t look that thick to me.” Tani held up her hands, and Lofty scoffed, answering, “Well, we only just made it, en’t it? When Evan by y’er kingdom gets going, it’ll soon fatten right up!” Evan’s eyes sparkled. “Then we’d better start building our kingdom right away!” Lofty nodded, enthusiastic. “Ay, that’s the spirit, mun!”

“Well, we’ve done what we came here for.” Roland took the chance to conclude. “We should return to the sky pirates—Batu’s probably worried himself mighty.”

Tani chuckled. “Right!” She turned to the statue. “Oi, statue, can you please teleport us out o’here?” The statue blinked to life. “...OF COURSE. I’LL SEND YOU TO THE BASE OF THE STAIRS.”

---

“Cor, talk about a refreshin’ breeze! Now there’s bracin’ alright!”

Lofty had been enjoying the wind for the few minutes the crew had returned to base, standing on a crate. Chingis, who had joined the rest of the pirates in observing the fellow, elbowed Roland in the ribs. “That the Higgledies yer were talkin’ about earlier?” He whispered. “Ye did say they were small, aye.” Roland covered his smile with his hand. “Can you see him, Chingis?” “Aye.” “There you go.”

Murmurs spread through the crowd, and they parted to let Batu through to stand in front of Evan. “Ye made it back in one piece, eh, lad?” He held a proud smile. “And from the look of yer face, ye didn’t come back empty-handed.” Evan nodded, gesturing at Lofty in introduction. “No. This is my Kingmaker: Lofty.” Lofty waved at Batu from on the box, who… looked somewhat more convinced than the rest of the sky pirates. “Yer Kingmaker seems a little… little, ain’t he?” Lofty pointed at Batu, stomping on the wooden crate. “Yoy, says you, shortie!” The sky pirates’ chief guffawed before resting his hands on his hips and addressing his crew. “Alright, ye scurvy dogs! Make ready for a feast! These kingmakin’ swabs here deserve a celebration!”

“A feast? Truly?” From the pirates’ reaction, they hadn’t had one in a while. “Aye!”

---

Through the night of celebrations, partying, congratulating Evan, and of course, drinking, Roland took note of a few things. Firstly, Lofty could drink. Well, it was more akin to just inhaling the mug and its contents entirely, which led to loud guffawing from all around the campfire. It took Batu convincing the pirates not to rid themselves of all their containers to stop. Secondly, Roland’s phone had finally run out of battery. He had thought to record the partying in it, but the phone only blinked an image of a sadly empty battery, so he had returned it to the arms ring. Well, that was one less thing to take him away from enjoying the moment. Thirdly, as the sky began to light up, the pirates
seemed to collect themselves, faces serious.

Evan had been watching the sunrise when Batu called his name. He turned around to the entire band of sky pirates standing in front of him. “Ye mean to become king of this here world, is that not so?” Batu asked. Evan nodded. “Yes…?” “Well, here’s the thing…” Batu paused for a moment. “I sense somethin’ in ye. And I’m not the only one.”

The Cloud Snake kneeled down on one knee, and the rest of the pirates followed, men and women alike. Evan looked around the group, a bit shocked. “The people of Cloudcoil Canyon do hereby swear fealty.” Batu declared. “We serve you now… Your Majesty!”

Evan’s look of shock grew into joy. “O-oh... Thank you… P-please, stand!”

The newly found following did so, and Batu walked over to pat on Evan’s shoulders. “Now, go get some rest. Ye’ve been running around all day.” He turned to Roland and Tani, the latter of which was getting ready to slink off. “Ye too. Especially ye, girlie.”

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Roland dreamt of the smell of tea.

He was back in his office again, the mystery person now seated opposite him. The weather outside was still stormy. The cup of tea was still piping hot, steam floating upwards. Roland hummed, intrigued.

“I’d have thought it’d be ice cold by now…”

The person in his dreams nodded. “In reality, yes.” The double voice had lessened since last time, and Roland could hear that they had a masculine tone. “But this is a dream, and dreams are of a strange nature. Sometimes, things fly by in an instant… and…” Their head drooped. “Sometimes, everything is kept in stasis. You’d think an eternity had passed, but you’re kept looking at the same event, over and over. We… I believe we’re in a dream of the latter sort.”


“Do you know Evan?” Roland asked. “No, scratch that- Could you be his dead dad visiting me as a ghost?” The person shook their head instantly. “No. The one who fathered him was a Grimalkin. I am no father.”

Thought as much. “Then who are you? Can you tell me your name, at least?”

“My name is-“ The person turned away. “No. I’m afraid I… cannot tell you. It is not worth knowing. Only leads more questions than answers.” They took a deep breath, posture tense. “Evan is your priority right now. Not me. If it is fate that you shall uncover the truth, you will know.” The wind picked up outside the window just like last time. “Go, now. He will wake up soon.”

“Wait-“

---

Roland saw Evan outside of the cabin they had stayed in. The king looked rather pleased.
“Good dreams, today, Evan?” “Yes. Still quite the strange one, but yes.” “Call me curious, but… What did you dream about?” Just to make sure they weren’t somehow having the same kind of dream. Evan tilted his head, curious, but obliged. “It was… in a castle? I was having a discussion with a boy my age at a tea table. We… talked about how building a kingdom would be hard, and to help with it, I have to listen to everyone’s stories and learn from them.” Ah, alright. That was a lot different from Roland’s- “Why do you ask, Roland?”

“A person in my dreams told me to congratulate you on getting a Kingmaker.” Evan blinked, then smiled.

“They seem nice. Tell them I said thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 11! That's a wrap for Act 2 of the game. I'll take a couple of days off to watch through playthroughs, because it's starting to weedle into unknown territory. I've only played till just past Act 4, after all. Lofty's accent will take some time to adapt, too. Watch me and my abilities to make things while playing barely half the game, aha.

And our mystery person keeps being mysterious. As y'all probably expected. Don't worry, we'll have plenty of chances to see them. Eight more, probably.
“Khunbish, does the sky pirates keep a world map of sorts?” “Aye. What’d ye need with it?” “I want to take a look at it. Can you bring it here? On the crate… Alright, thanks.” “Ye welcome, matey.”

Evan walked over to Roland, who was now staring intently at the map. "What are you doing, Roland?" The older man looked up. “Oh, Evan. Right on time. Can you tell me if this map is up to date?” The young king traced the borders of each country, humming before giving an answer. “Looks like it. The boundaries haven’t changed all that much over the last few decades, after all. Are you looking for a place for our kingdom?” “Yes- though… Hm.”

“Oi! What are you two talking about over there?”

The king and his companion looked up to see Tani and Batu walk over. Evan waved at them. “Good morning! We’re just discussing how we need a piece of empty land to build our kingdom properly.” Batu scratched his head. “Arr… now that’ll be an awful pain in the neck, won’t it? Why, ye could just raid a village somewhere, start out with that as yer base, an’-”

That won’t do at all, Roland thought. “We’re not pirates, Batu. You understand?” Batu guffawed. “Aye, aye, keep yer hair on! Old Batu was just havin’ a bit o’ fun wi’ye!” “Alright.” Roland returned to observing the map. “Anyway, if we’re to build a new kingdom, we need a good spot. Location is everything. See here. There’s a few places that are still vacant, but…” He pointed to one of the spots, vaguely noticing that the two kids were whispering to each other. “That’s too remote. We can’t really influence other countries if we go there. And this one… might be too arid, from how the map’s drawn it.” “Quite picky, ain’t ye?” “A new nation is like a tiny, defenceless animal-” Roland explained. “-By which I mean that any predator that comes along can gobble it right up. So the only way to let it grow is to put it out of harm’s way, where you can defend it easily- usually with geographical locations.”

“So what qualities of a place are we looking for?” Tani asked. Roland brought a hand to his chin. “As I might’ve mentioned, we need a place that’s difficult to invade, for sure. And somewhere with plenty of resources. If we have these both… We have a chance.”

“Then how does this look, Roland?” Evan pointed at a spot to the southeast of Cloudcoil- a place titled Heartlands, backed by mountains and facing the sea. Roland hummed. “It looks like a good place… but isn’t it already named and claimed?” Evan shook his head. “No. It’s only been named the Heartlands because it’s a spot that people often come across when travelling from nation to nation, but no one’s officially included it in their lands.”

Tani crossed her arms. “Well, the Heartlands’ straight down the mountain and past the ruins. Not too far off.” Roland took note of it and turned to Batu. “Is it possible that we fly there?” “Well now… It ain’t exactly we can. It’s the winds o’ Cloudcoil that supports the birdmobiles, ye see. Might be able to take us down, but then that’s two birdmobiles that we need to push back up right to the base all o’er again.”

“So walking would be a better option, then.” Batu did a harrumph. “There’s the bandits down at the ruins o’ late. They ain’t got the nerve to go traispin’ up the canyon, but they’re a right gaggle to fight through…” The sky pirates’ chief thought for a moment, then turned to Tani. “Go fetch the pair o’
numbskulls here for me, won’t ye girlie?” “Aye, Boss!”

It didn’t take long. Chingis and Khumbish ran to join the group. “Ye rang, Boss?” Roland noticed that a woman had sneaked up behind them. Batu crossed his arms. “Aye, listen up! We’re away to set up a kingdom down at the Heartlands, an’ we’ll all needin’ to smash our way through a bandit or two to get there. Ye and yer men’ll be joinin’ us!” The two sky pirates, needless to say, cheered at the thought of clobbering their plundering rivals, and the woman behind them piped up as well, ”A scrap, boys! Yaharr!”

Batu heard her. “Gerel? I only sent for this here pair o’ scurvy dogs. Unless…” Gerel laughed. “Sorry, Boss. Fancied a peek at this brave new world the boy’s buildin’ us all!” She turned to Evan. “Ye won’t mind, will ye?” “N-no, of course not! The more the merrier, actually.” “Great! I’ll go pack up right fine.”

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As it turned out, the bandits were… To say them as pushovers would be a large understatement. Roland honestly felt pumped imagining an epic showdown of pirates versus bandits.

“Gah! I wasn’t ready!” The leader yelled, running away, an arrow sticking out his vest. “Y-You blokes don’t play far!” He turned around and shook his fists. “You’ll pay for this! You’ll see!”

As Batu swung his hammer and jeered loudly, Evan turned around to check on the two other groups of pirates. They all shrugged at him. There were a few pirates wounded, but that was quickly fixed with a soreaway or three, along with a bit of help from Runcible.

“Youell pay for this, huh.” Lofty picked his nose. “There’s original.” He flicked whatever came out in front of him- was his nose even there before? Roland wondered- and pointed. “And there’s yuer Heartlands, by yo’der.”

“Aye!” Gerel marched forward, pulling the large cart behind her. Chingis ran up to behind the cart to help push it, and was soon joined by Khumbish. The cart was covered by a large piece of cloth, but it was stocked from bottom to beyond the top with whatever Gerel had taken along. When Roland had asked about it when they’d gone halfway down Cloudcoil, she only laughed and told him that he’d find out later.

The Heartlands, just as the map had illustrated, was a large plain of golden grass. As the wind blew, the plains rustled, and Lofty gave a grin. “And there’s a good breeze right there.” Tani commented. Lofty nodded enthusiastically, then jumped. “Yoy, the nerve, taking my… Meh. You best get over there and help the lady out with the tents.” The four turned and stared at the Kingmaker. “Tents?”

At that mention, Gerel tossed the cloth off of the cart- revealing stacks of folded white canvas, crates and barrels. Lofty snorted. “While youer off chatting about yuer dream kingdom, Miss Gerel’d gone an’ packed youer sleeping places for you. Go thank her by helping out, won’t you?”

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“I’d hate to say it after having everyone help set up but…” Roland straightened up, putting a hammer aside. “We can’t live in tents forever. We might want to start thinking where we can get our next bit of building resources…” Tani sat down on the ground with a groan. “That’s one fer another day, ain’t it? I’m pooped if you ask me.” Evan put a hand to his chin and thought. “It might be good to get an idea where to go next, at least.”

“What resources are ye needing?” Batu asked. Roland thought of an appropriate next step. “Some
good-quality wood would be a start.” The Cloud Snakestroked his chin as he came up with an idea. “That’s plenty easy- The Forest of Niall’s just down the way. We’ll just hustle down and chop ourselves a couple o’ choice logs, shall we?”

“Oi, now hol’ on a second, pops!” Tani retorted. “Niall told you the last time: You can’t just keep strolling in nilly-willy and go chopping his logs like that!”

Seems like the two pirate dad-daughter duo knew this Niall- quite well, if he wanted to guess further. Roland raised his hand. “I’m guessing he’s the owner of the forest?” Tani nodded, answering, “Yes. He’s the leader of the Greenlings, who live in the forest. Nothing happens in the woods without his permission. He’s the one who let us gather wood when we needed to improve our settlement, after all.” “Then we should speak to him! I’ve never met him-” Evan suggested, “-but I’m sure he’ll give us his blessing.”

“Then ye definitely don’t know the old skinflint, lad!” Batu crossed his arms. "Tighter than a hangman’s noose, mark my words. Ye should see how much o’ a damned fortune he wheeled out o’ me the last time.” “And that’s because you snuck in there in the middle of the night and lopped a tree, pops!” Having fired that off, Tani turned to Evan. “Niall’s alright- usually. It’s worth a try to go talk with him, but you do need to expect to pay up.”

So cash money’s the main challenge with Niall, then. “I can handle that,” Roland mused. “I’ve brought my fair share of hard-nosed customers to the negotiations table to cut deals in my time…” Batu heard the latter part of his muttering. “What’s that now?”

Roland coughed. “Never mind. Tani, do you want to come along? In case you’re tired, we’ll go pay a visit to Niall’s forest and have a look at what kind of person he is before the sun goes down.” The redhaired stood up. “Yeah! I’m just joking when I said I’m pooped. Come on, let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 12! This bit was a bit of a hassle to get through, since it's both very important in terms of location-moving and not exactly important in plot. Went and gave Gerel a bit of time to shine, too, since she just pops up for a cutscene and goes poof afterwards.

From how Batu just brought up Niall immediately and gave that bit of description, I'm thinking the two blokes know each other, so I'll try to get a bit more into that in the later chapters.
“Hrm…” Batu muttered as the gang stepped into Niall’s Forest. “Is it me, or has somethin’ changed since we last went in here?”

Roland, personally, was busy taking in the sights to give any speculations. The route to the forest was beautiful, with fluorescent flowers and moss lighting the way in the night, and the forest itself was just as impressive. Trees reached from ground to sky, decorated by spiralling indents and glowing bands and rectangles of red, on which patterns circled. Strange flora floated along the breeze. Being in urban grounds for most- well, all- of his life, this world was a gift that keeps giving.

“Those red ribbons and rectangles weren’t there before, I can be sure of that.” Tani commented. “Something’s gone down in here recently.”

“Those are… notices, aren’t they?” Evan questioned, tiptoing to look up the huge tree. “I-I can’t quite see the lettering, though.” At that, Batu picked the little king up onto his shoulders with a gruff “Heave-ho!”, prompting a surprised squeak from the latter. “Can ye see now? Go on ‘nd read what’s on it for us, laddie. All we see are squiggles.” Batu asked, and Evan nodded, sheepishly laughing. “Yes, thank you… I’ll see now…” The half-Grimalkin inspected the notice closest to him. “As… according to the agreement, this forest is now property of Goldpaw…? All inhabitants are advised to leave within the near future… Signed by Pugnacius, Grand High Roller. That’s the content of the notice.” Evan jumped off the pirate’s shoulders, landing neatly on his feet. “These are eviction notices.”

Roland realised he didn’t know either of the names Evan mentioned. “Goldpaw, you say?” “What, ye don’t know Goldpaw?” Batu looked at Roland suspiciously. “The Nation Ruled by Luck? That doesn’t strike a chord in ye?” Tani patted her father’s arm and stepped forward. “He’s a bit foreign, pops. Keep your hair on.” She turned to Roland as she explained, “Goldpaw’s a nation just beyond the forest, and Pugnacius’s its current leader. It’s known as that because everything there is ruled by dice rolls.” “That’s an exaggeration, right?” Tani laughed at Roland- must be the incredulous expression he found himself making. “You’ll see- we have a big chance to have to take a walk down there.”

“That we do.” Batu growled. “Something fishy’s afoot- I’m sure we all can smell it in the air. We’ll go find Niall and get the truth out of him.”

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“Please! You have to let me work here! You just have to! You live here, don’t you?”

A black-furred Grimalkin was pleading for employment to a few masked people- Greenlings, Roland guessed. One of the Greenlings stuttered as they tried to explain the situation. “O-och… it’s not that simple, sir… For one thing, we dinnae need tae eat-” “Not even fresh, toasty bread?” “W-we…”

“Is something going on here?” Evan had entered the conversation. The Grimalkin turned around. “Oh! Please give me a jo-?” He rubbed his eyes, staring with gaping mouth. The Greenling that had attempted to turn the boy down politely sighed. “Well… it’s awkward, tae be honest. This young fellae here- he says he wants to be Master Niall’s personal chef and won’t take no for an answer.
But… we don’t eat…”

“King Evan?!” The Grimalkin yelled. “Y-You’re alive!” Evan nodded, pondering a bit, “You’re from Ding Dong Dell, I presume?” “Yes, your Majesty!” The Grimalkin bowed politely. “The name’s Floyd. I’m training to be a chef, you see- but the coup happened, and I got lost looking for a job…” Quite a string of bad luck. “You’re welcome to come to my new kingdom if you need a place to live, Floyd.” Evan smiled as he addressed the novice chef. “It’s in the Heartlands, you see.” “Yes! Oh, yes, that’d be splendid! I-I could be your court chef!” Floyd paused. “So far I’ve only learned to make bread, but they’re mighty fine bread! I’ll do my best to learn more, too!” “I’ll look forward to finding out what recipes you come with, Floyd.” “Yes, your Majesty! I’ll go right away.”

As the eager cat-kid ran off, the three Greenlings exhaled sighs of relief. “Thank you… Och, the feller was a stubborn wee laddie! You saved our hats right there, Mister Evan.” Another piped up, “I presume ye’re here tae see Master Niall? I do hope you’re not looking for employment as well…” They were promptly smacked on the head, and they quickly corrected themselves. “W-well! We can’t deny yae an audience after that little faver. Please, follow we three.”

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They were led into a small clearing- a large puddle of water encircling a moss-covered trunk. A old-looking Greenling without a mask- a nest of branches sat on his head, instead- was sleeping on it, and as the group neared the trunk, he sat up and yawned.

“Oi, Niall, ye blockhead.” Batu crossed his arms. “What did ye do to land ye in this mighty mess?” Niall smacked his lips. “And here I thought you were coming along to ask for more wood. Din’ do naething.” “Nothin’? Evan lad told us what the notices said! Why are ye getting evicted, hrn?” “Aye, just lost a bet to Pugnacius. Or two.”

Batu looked shocked. “Ye lost? But ye’ve had a shinin’ record of the bets ye won- even the one when we bet whether I could sneak a log out before any of yer Greenlin’s caught me!” Tani briefly gave Batu an unimpressed stare before talking to Niall, “Can you talk about how all that happened? I’m sure you wouldn’t just hand your forest away like that. You said you were betting with Pugnacius?”

Niall scratched his head and sighed. “Aye, that’s the fella! Invited me over for a wee shake of the auld dice, and before I knew it, I’d lost my shirt! So I did what everyone else’d do and popped the forest down as collateral, and… well, it didnae go mah way…” The old Greenling rolled his eyes. “Now his flunkies are trampin’ through mah lovely forest, stickin’ nonsense on mah trees and tryin’ tae kick me out on my behind! The heartless devils, they are!”

“So we should call the Forest of Niall the Forest of Pug now, shouldn’t we?” Roland asked, and Niall faked spitting at him. What? It sounded funny- a forest of pugs would certainly be an attraction back in his world. Meanwhile, Batu shrugged. “I’ve an inkind’ ye’ve been bilked, ol-timer. The games in Goldpaw’re said to be rigged to beggary.” “That they are!” Niall complained. “Crooked as a pug’s hind leg, mind ye!”

Someone losing his entire property to the head of state, of which the games were often accused of cheating? That could be a start. Roland brought his hand to his chin. “Mister Niall, I have a proposition.” “Hm?” “Now, say… We need wood. Lots of it. If we are able to get your forest back for you, would you give us what we need?” “I’d be happy to say yes, but…” Niall turned to Batu. “Didn’t you just lug a cart o’ it off just last month? Did them wee wyverns cause trouble again?” “Oh, nay. That’s not for me. It’s for Evan lad-“ Batu pointed to the blonde boy. “He’s buildin’ a mighty fine kingdom, ‘nd he needs the wood to do that.” Niall jumped down the log and inspected the king in question, then scoffed. “Oh, spare me your tales, Cloud Snaek. I love drama as much as
the next man, but that ain’t do. Next time, bring an actual king, not a wee urchin, hear?”

“But I am the king!” Evan interjected, and Niall raised an eyebrow at him. “Ye? Di’ye think I was born yesterday? Aye, I’ve seen kings, and they’ve a… certain something in them. Dignity, ye ken? Gravitas, a touch of class, ye hear me right.” “You… don’t see any of that in me?” Evan drooped. “No, not at all. Shoo, shoo.”

“Cor, don’t you say that about my king!” Lofty jumped. “As Kingmaker, I disapprove of your speech!” Niall looked down, then pounced back, arms raised. “Even if you wee lad are his Kingmaker, I still-” “He’s a very good king, I’ll have you know!” Tani had joined in the defense of Evan. “He used to be the king of Ding Dong Dell, but some mice- his closest subjects overthrew him! And now he’s going to build a new kingdom, and it’s going to be amazing!”

That finally managed to convince Niall. “Crikey o’ blimey! That’s a crikey auld tale! So you’re Evan? The Evan lad that everyone were sayin’ perished in the troubles o’er that way?” Evan nodded, and Niall brought a hand to his beard. “Crikey… I’d guessed the same as all’em else, but… Very fine then. Help me take mah forest back, and I’ll cut the trees down maself! Deal?”

Evan nodded. “Deal! Thank you, Mister Niall. We’ll try our best solve your problem, I promise!”

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“So Goldpaw’s our next stop…” Roland mused as the Greenlings led them back to the exit. “I’m guessing we’ll need to try avoiding all the betting traps.”

“They’re everywhere, Roland.” Batu huffed, stomping up to him. “Yer chances o’ not being involved in one is as good as rollin’ a zero on a dice. On that note- Where ARE ye from?”

“You heard Tani- I’m foreign.” Explaining a concept that’d come straight out of a fairy tale to younger people like Evan and Tani wasn’t too difficult, but to an adult, especially the leader of people who’d seen the harsher parts of the world? Roland couldn’t muster the strength. “I’d like to keep my origins mysterious.”

“’nd I’d like to make sure no shady figures are goin’ around messin’ up things for the lad.” Batu growled. “Any’ne around the world would’ve heard tales of Goldpaw ‘nd to avoid them lest they end in rags. Anyone who hadn’t may as well be from another world.”

“Then maybe I AM from another world, Batu.” Roland felt the frustration swell up in him. “Let’s not pursue the subject further- we have a scandal to uncover.” He picked up his pace and widened the distance between him and the Cloud Snake, hearing as the latter continued to growl until Tani chased up to him and started a conversation about Niall’s past betting luck.

Roland brought a hand to his chest, where his heart was thundering away. That was a bad move- a very bad one. For one, Batu definitely could punch him right there and then, and for two, that had set up a rift between two of Evan’s closest supporters.

When Evan jogged up next to him and gestured in worry, Roland shook his head and told the young king that he needed to stay away from the temptations for joining a bet. Now was not the time to trouble the king.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading chapter 13! Funny how the number very related to luck happens to be the chapter where Goldpaw is first introduced. Things are sure getting spicy.

I added in a bit of arguing between the two men because, well, you'll see later, haha. I can tell you that it’s mostly for the argument at the end of Act 4, because Batu's questioning of Roland's origins kinda felt out of left field unless I missed something before.

I'm looking forward to writing about Goldpaw!
On their way to Goldpaw, Roland was able to ask a few more details regarding the place. According to Evan, the Kingmaker of Goldpaw was nocturnal, and had over time influenced the locale to be night all the time. In return, it assisted in helping its residents create decorations that could glow in the dark, which the people of Goldpaw used in abundance.

“That’s why Goldpaw’s also called the Never-Night Nation, among other titles.” Evan explained. “I heard that with all the lights, people can barely catch a shuteye- and with no sense of time and nothing else to do, they’d always end up loitering in the casinos.” “That can’t be healthy.” Roland commented, and Evan giggled. “We’ll see. Look over there, Roland.” Even in the night, rays of light shone into the sky. Underneath it was a massive red fort, from which lights of various other colors could be visible. Evan nodded to himself. "That’s Goldpaw.”

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Goldpaw followed some sort of East-land aesthetic, Roland thought as the crew walked through the main street. The lantern decorations and lotus ponds reminded him of how people would imagine ancient Pexue to be like, back in his world.

A smell wafted from their left, and a dog woman stepped in front of them. “You must be new visitors! Welcome! And as all visitors do, you should try Sweet Saffron’s hot streaker noodles! Piping hot noodles peeking out from under a sea of red!”

The description and smell reminded Roland of the Pexuen noodle store that had set up in his neighbourhood when he was a kid. He remembered the noodles being pretty spicy, but he’d managed to overcome the entire bowl once or twice. It was delicious. The memory tempted him.

“Roland, do you want to give it a try?” Evan tugged on the older man’s sleeve. “Personally, I’d like to.”

Roland noticed the worried stares of the two sky pirates behind them. Tani spoke up. “Uh… Evan, I don’t think that’s a good idea. These noodles are pretty spicy. We have a very important person to meet, remember?” A challenge? Much welcomed. “If you’re worried about Evan, I can share a bowl.” Roland answered. “I’ve never eaten here before.”

“First-timers, I see!” The saleswoman clapped her hands. “Well, you’re most welcome! We can give you an empty bowl if you’d like-” She gestured to the vacant chairs in front of the restaurant’s counter. “-Sit down when you’re ready!” Batu scratched his head. “We’re bein’ serious, both of ye. If you’ve never had spicy food before, I say ye walk very slowly away from there.”

Too late, as the two challengers had already plopped down on two of the chairs, Lofty sitting on top of Evan’s head. Evan smiled, “Never too late to try cuisine from other nations, right?” “The restaurant’s called Sweet Saffron-” Roland added, “-It can’t be that bad, can it?”

The sky pirate dad and daughter looked at each other, sighed and crossed their arms. Meanwhile, the dogfolk saleswoman called out to the kitchen, “One Hot-Streaker, coming right up!”

The noodles in question were exactly as it’d been described- covered entirely by a layer of blood-red oil. Roland siphoned some of the noodles into the bowl the chef had given him, and took up his

They both stuck a bite of the hot streaker noodles into their mouths, and looked at each other.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” Roland said, ready to take another bite.

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“Thank you for your patronage!” The saleswoman waved as the four walked off.

“I told you it was a bad idea!” Tani exclaimed immediately. “Even Batu and I can only finish half a bowl each- and you two are beginners! You’re lucky to have Lofty cover up for you, Evan.” Evan chuckled embarrassedly, sipping the peach milk they’d bought afterwards. “I’m glad I’m able to withstand a bite, then.” The half-Grimalkin turned to Roland. “U-uh, Roland… how are you doing? Any better?”

“I’m hell.” Got to thank Batu for helping him carry the coat. His surroundings still seemed to sway. “Sweaty. Fine.”

Huge regret that he’d downed the milk in a single go. Also that he’d taken two bites just for the heck of it. His entire digestive system would kill him for this. Was burning him alive already. A mercy kill would be welcomed.

“Cor, look at him!” He heard Lofty say. “That’s the smile of a broken man if I see one, no mistakin’.”

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Fortunately, Goldpaw being night all the time meant that Roland didn’t know how much time had passed before he recovered from being hot-streaked. Unfortunately, that also meant that he didn’t know how much time had passed since being hot-streaked. Lofty told him it took fifteen minutes. It felt much longer to him. He still hadn’t been able to put his coat on.

“I’m so, so sorry for the inconvenience.” He muttered again as they made their way to Fortune Square. “I should’ve thought to wait until we were leaving to try it.”

“’nd go back to Evermore lookin’ like a ghost?” Batu looked genuinely concerned. “Ye’d scare the livin’ daylights out of everyone with how ye look like right now, lad.” “Do… do I look that bad?” “Fifteen min’s ago you looked right ready to drop.” “R-right. Sorry.”

Their attention was quickly attracted by the huge statue in the middle of the square. A six-armed figure, holding various gamble-related items, sat with leg crossed. Groups of dogfolk gathered to the sides of it, separated by fencing, praying fervently. “Oh!” One of them- likely one of the officers-called out to them. “You’ve come at an auspicious time, my fellow visitors. Today will be the day when Lady Luck decides our tax rates for the month to come.” He gestured to the fences. “Do find yourselves a place- the ceremony will begin soon.”

The gang nudged past the groups of dogfolk, and Roland tried his best to eavesdrop on their discussions.

“Man, I hope Lady Luck gives us a one this month… It’d be great to have to pay no taxes for once.” A second dogfolk sighed. “No hopes, no disappointments, Ya Qin. We’re gonna get a six again and scrap our wallets for our third consecutive month of six-fold taxes… ugh.” “Guess we can’t help it. That’s how luck goes- no luck, no Goldpaw.” “And Goldpaw expects us to go to the casinos too… What’s good for a casino if we have no money for it?”
Seeing that the other three had gone up ahead, Roland took the chance to enquire. “Excuse me, sirs, but why does the state want you to gamble?” “Hm, you don’t know about that?” One of the dogfolk frowned. “Well, guess you’re not from Goldpaw. I bet you’ve heard plenty about the casinos in here—but not that the casinos are state-owned. Our money comes from the government, and gets returned to it. A self-reliant cycle of cash flow is good and all, but…” The other dogfolk prodded him in the ribs, and he jolted. “It’s all about luck.” Roland nodded, understanding that they didn’t want to talk bad about their nation to a stranger. “I see. Thank you very much.” “Ya welcome.”

Roland met up with the others after a bit of pushing, and Evan asked, “Where were you, Roland? I was sure we’d lost you in the crowd.” “Was just gathering some information.” He lowered his voice, “Apparently the people of Goldpaw’ve been seeing some unlucky days too. Pretty suspicious, if you ask me.”

“All of Goldpaw, stand ready!” One of the officers declared. “Master Pugnacius is here!”

The crowds rustled, and through the dogfolk audience, Roland watched as a pudgy pug man—yet another statement that he’d add to the list of sentences he’d never thought to say before—walked up to the statue, dice-decorated staff in hand. Pugnacius bowed to his Lady Luck, then spread his arms wide dramatically.

“Lady of Fortune! May luck be on our side this month!” The Grand High Roller shouted. He raised his staff, and slammed it down. Amongst hushed whispers, the statue clanked to life, raised a dice in its hand and dropped it. The dice bounced once, twice—it was ready to roll a five—then at the last second, it flipped over to reveal a six. The audience groaned and sighed.

That can’t possibly NOT be suspicious.

“The taxes for the month will increase sixfold!” Pugnacius addressed his people. “Tighten your belts and trust in the Lady of Fortune, fellow citizens of Goldpaw. All shall be well!”

“The ceremony is over.” The officer that had been managing announcements stated, sounding quite disappointed. “You may all return to your posts.”

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“That has got to be rigged!” Tani exclaimed, now that they were left on their own. “Rolling a six for three consecutive months? That’s too small of a chance to not be!”

“We’ll not get far just by makin’ accusations without proof, girlie.” Batu mused, pointing at the hall that Pugnacius had retreated into, behind the statue. “We’d best go see the man himself.”

They started up the staircase, but their way was quickly barred by a guardsman.

“Only people with business may enter.” He stated. “We were sent here by Niall, from the forest.” Evan answered. “It’s important!” The guardsman was not impressed, and waved a hand at him. “The Grand High Roller is occupied right now. Leave before we have to escort you out.”

If everyone here is preoccupied with fortune, then… “What if we play you for the chance to see him? Put the decision in the hands of the Lady of Fortune.” Roland suggested. The guardsman smiled at that—“A game of dice, you say?” “Yes.”

The dogfolk smiled wider. “Fine. You win, you get the audience you want. You lose, you pay me. And each time you lose, you have to pay more.” More, as in? Vague terms was always the worst, but this was their best bet right now, and they couldn’t risk losing that by asking too much. “…I say we can agree to those terms.” “Nice. I will make ready. Gather the money you can wager, and come
back to me once you have.”

“I’ve a bad feeling about this.” Batu stated as they went down the stairs to discuss once more. “We don’t have none to cough up, to begin. ’nd knowing Goldpaw, we’re goin’ to lose.” Roland brought his hand to his chin. “That we will.” And once they scratched the surface of the cheating, they can start digging deeper.

Chapter End Notes

And that, my folks, is exactly why I’ve been looking forward to writing about Goldpaw. Being Roland is suffering- I went to check out the page for Hellfire Sauce over on TV Tropes just for this anecdote. Personally, being from somewhere near China, I've had my fair share of spicy trying, so I had a lot of fun writing about it.

Thank you for reading chapter 14! The name of Pexue, aka not-China, is derived from a Chinese mythical creature, Pixiu, which itself is also known for being related to luck and providing fortune, especially money-related ones for those who wear decorations shaped after it.
“One more time!” “Evan, no-” “One! More! Time!”

Roland had expected themselves to lose- but he definitely hadn’t expected Evan to have such a competitive streak to keep challenging the guardsman. This was the third time he had done so- and the guardsman had won the first two. Perhaps he should’ve figured from the fact that the young king had immediately taken up the noodle challenge just half an hour or so ago.

The guardsman shook the two dice in his hand and threw them on the table. They bounced, and formed two sixes. Roland didn’t bother to remember the rules, but Evan pondered for a while. “I say Red!” The guardsman smirked, and threw the last dice. It bounced one, twice, about to fall on three- and as he had seen with the statue’s dice previously, unnaturally flipped backwards and landed on six.

“Three losses, now… quite unfortunate.” The dogfolk sighed. “Will you hand over your debt of ten million guilders?”

The entire group practically exclaimed together. “TEN MILLION?!” Batu yelled, slamming on the table. “T’was just a thousand on our first attempt, ye dog!” The guardsman shrugged. “I warned you about the debt. Twice. We go by the hundred rule in Goldpaw- one thousand becomes one hundred thousand, and one hundred thousand becomes ten million.”

“We don’t have anywhere near that amount…” Evan whimpered. Well, that much was true: even with all the goody-selling they did before, they had… three thousand guilders. The guardsman nodded. “Well, happens all the time here. You seem trustworthy enough- I’ll allow you to delay the payment of your debt.” He snapped his fingers, and a black… abnormal-looking bird jumped onto Evan’s head from an orb of light. It croaked once, then-

“KRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAK! YOU OWE ME! YOU OWE ME!”

The dogfolk uncovered his ears. “This is a Duebill- just a reminder that you need to pay. It will leave when you do. Now, do go on and find yourself some work- I don’t want to hear it scream next to me, thank you.”

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“And that’s us mighty fine in debt.” Batu concluded, once they have went down the stairs. “Shouldn’t have let that idea into yer head, Roland. Not even once.”

“I’ll stay away from gambling from now on…” Evan drooped. The Duebill winded up to scream again, but Tani smacked it on its head, managing to shush it. “But now what?” The king in debt asked. “We’re not closer to seeing Sir Pugnacious, and now we’re ten million guilders in debt…”

“It’s not the end of the world, Evan. Look over there, and there.” Roland pointed at the pair of dogfolk nearest to them, one of which was accompanied by a similar duebill, then to another dogfolk near the entrance of the square, chased around by a very rotund duebill. “I think we can assume nearly half the town is in debt like you.” Tani nodded, adding, “Plus, didn’t you see how the dice just flipped over on itself in your third challenge? That’s mighty fishy to me!” Nice, so she’d noticed it too. Batu scratched his head, “Nay, was so lost in the game it slipped me notice!” Evan agreed
with a similar statement.

“In this case, we have an opening.” Roland pushed the Duebill aside as it was about to yell at him. “I’m assuming that all the government officers use the same die.” “That they are.” Batu confirmed. “Asked the bloke on the first try, said it was special die for bigwigs and such. Ye missed it staring at the die, didn’t ye?” “I did. Thanks for telling me.”

“If we go and get our hands on one of the dice, we can figure out how it worked, right?” Evan asked. Roland nodded. Good thinking. “And the nearest spot where dice is abundant is the state-owned casinos. The place’s probably covered in it.”

Lofty blinked. “So we stroll in, nab a dice and run out with sirens and screamin’ birds?” “That’s something I can get behind! Count me in!” Tani grinned. Evan seemed a bit intimidated at the idea, but nodded. “Seconded.” “And thirded! That’s a plan.”

“KRAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-“ Tani whacked the Duebill again, literally hissing. “Oh, shut up, ye dumb avian!”

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“Please, hold up, sirs.” The employee at the entrance of the casino looked incredulously at Evan. “The house kindly asks that those who are… ahem… troubled by debt to refrain from playing. Especially minors.”

“He’s with us.” Roland said to the employee. “I won’t be letting him play any of the games, he’ll be watching.” The casino guard approved of it. “By all means. Please, enjoy your visit.”

Once they entered, Roland couldn’t help but sigh a bit. “And now we look like terrible guardians to Evan, don’t we?” “Dice first, ego later!” Tani waved at the three. “I’ll go off and see what I can do. Catcha in a bit.” Batu soon walked off as well. As they left, Roland and Evan shrugged at each other. “We should ask about the special dice too. Maybe that should give us-“

“The special dice, you say?” A dogfolk from the far side of the table spoke up. “Well, all of us want one of them auspicious little cubes, don’t we? Unfortunately, they’re only granted to specific, hand-picked people in this realm. Not even nationfolk like me would have a chance of getting paws on one. Alas…”

The bout of asking around provided them with just as little help as their first response. Roland had thought to just sit down at one of the tables and watch, but-

“Another litter of foreigners coming to decry the dice and the casino?” A buff dogfolk was looking down at Batu, who had an enormous Duebill with him. “Ha! A state-owned casino blessed by Lady Luck herself, rigged? I say you’re just trying to wiggle your way out of your debts! Sore losers, no more than that!”

“What’d ye say?” Something in the gambler’s speech ignited Batu’s temper, and he stomped closer to the buff dogfolk. “Ye think ye got winning streaks in front of ye?” The two men were glowering at each other now. “I’m only saying you’ve just trying to wiggle your way out of your debts! Sore losers, no more than that!”

The commotion had gathered quite a bit of people, which was a problem. Jogging over, Roland whispered to Batu, “Batu, that’s enough. We’re going to get the officers’ attention at this rate.” The Cloud Snake smirked and whispered back, “That’s exactly what I want.” What, a casino fight? “Being thrown out is the last thing we want, Batu!” “Just ye wait, lad.” Batu turned back to the
dogfolk, sneering. “Well, I’ve heard being in contact with auspicious people ups yer luck. Do ye want to see that in action?”

The taunt caused the crowd to start yelling—Duebills not included—and as Roland had worried, the croupiers and guards came running along. “Hold! Hold, or Lady Luck curse your fortunes!” They yanked the two men apart and pushed them out of the casino. Evan and Lofty quickly followed Batu outside, and as Roland watched, one of the guards tapped on his shoulder. “Uh, sir, I’m afraid you have to leave, too. It’s for everyone’s safety.” He hadn’t even been able to get near one of the tables. He groaned inwardly, and sighed. “Fine.”

Once outside, Roland confronted Batu. “What were you thinking, Batu? You probably blew our only chance.” Batu wiggled a finger with a strange smile. “Just ye see.”

Tani, in the company of a guard, skipped out of the casino. “Thanks, dad!” That didn’t sound like sarcasm at all. She turned to the rest of the group. “We’ll get to a quieter place so I can tell you what I found.”

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The five sat down on the chairs of the room the innkeeper had provided them with, along with a few words about fortune, and the sky pirate duo nodded at each other.

“I have a secret for yo—” Tani started, but Batu’s Duebill took a breath. Evan’s Duebill pecked it, squawking, and as the two birds fought, Tani returned to her speech. “I have a secret for you!” She pretended rummaging in her cloak, and brought out a dice with a dramatic flair. “Ta-da! Your favourite little scallywag went and swiped herself a dice with the help of her great ol’ pops!”

…whoa!

“That’s amazing!” Evan cheered. “Batu, you went and got yourself in debt just so you could get someone to fight you and give Tani a chance to take the die? That’s… that’s so brave of you!”

“Well… heh.” Batu scratched his head and grinned sheepishly. “Bettin’ an’ losin’ wasn’t planned— I can’t just stand and watch people have fun, can I? But when I got angry and went yellin’ that the game was rigged, the scurvy dog came along ‘nd said all that, so I came up with the plan there and then. Would’ve found a reason to start a brawl either way.”

“…and as a result, you’re mighty fine in debt now.” Roland resisted raising a palm to his face. This was a truly heroic sacrifice from Batu, after all. “I’ll, uh, see what I can do to help.” Batu guffawed, and Tani had to wave her arms to get the attention back her way. “Anyway! I’ve figured out the trick of it too.” She stretched out her hand, and pressed her finger on the side of one on the die. “Now, if I press the One…” A click, and she threw it on the ground, and the rest of the crew watched as the dice bounced— to a One. Tani picked it up. “And now I press the Two.” She threw, and the dice fell on four— and inexplicably flipped to reveal a Two. “Beginner’s luck, you say? You’ve got it alright!”

“What are we waiting for?” Evan got ready to stand up. “We have to go tell the guardsman that we’ve got him ratted out!” “Hold up— he’ll just deny it, Evan.” Roland paused to think. “And if he finds us having state-owned property, we’ll land in major trouble. Best if we keep our secret a secret.” The dice was pressure-activated— they need pressure from far-away— a projectile? He glanced at Lofty. Hygiene or no, he had a nose… right?

“I see where you’er’ going!” Lofty piped up all of a sudden. “Very crafty! Me likes it! Gather round, ol’ Lofty’s got the big plan!”
And so they did.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 15! Batu and Tani to the rescue.

A state-owned casino probably has some sort of defence to keep people from stealing the chips or whatever, but surveillance cameras don't seem to exist in Goldpaw from what we saw happen in the game. And what would one expect a brawny, tough-looking pirate to do? Start a fight, obviously. Batu knew that himself and put it to the best of uses.
…well, this was an escalation of events, Roland thought as he adjusted his coat.

“You do know once they find out about this, we’re going to land on the wanted lists, right?” He asked, and Batu chortled. “Of course. Now go on, ye do yer job.” Roland looked at the collapsed bodies, hoping that it hadn’t come to this. He turned to Evan, who was mildly shocked as well. “Come on, Evan. We have things to take care of.” “R-right…”

As they got closer to the building, Roland made a mental note to act like everything was fine- well, obviously it was not, his moral compass interjected. All the actions and events that led up to this moment had already been less than… legal, per se, starting from the moment they had engaged in bets. Disorderly conduct, theft, trespassing and now? Identity theft, if he had to stretch it. Ah well, he thought as he gave a mental account of all that transpired in that period of time, guess he had to say that the end justifies the means.

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As crafty as the guardsman was, even he was taken back when Evan proposed to bet one last time and would turn himself in for arrest if he lost. Most likely it was Evan’s age relative to his debt that shocked the dogfolk.

“A-are you sure, young one?” He stammered briefly. “You do know your debt will grow further a fourth time, yes? And being judged by Lady Luck for crimes is an event that will crush your reputation for your entire lifetime. You have a future in front of you yet- are you sure you want to do it?”

“Yes.” Evan nodded. “I’m not losing this time!”

“…very well. Kids of these ages…” He walked over to the table next to the palace doors once more. “Come. We will see to our final duel.” As the five gathered opposite to the guard, Lofty took care to sit on Evan’s lap. The guard threw the two dice, which rolled to form an eight. “Now, choose wisely.” Evan pretended to think. “Red!”

Even feeling worried about Evan’s future didn’t stop the guardsman from playing dirty, as he vaguely shuffled in his sleeves before throwing the last die out. Lofty dug around in his nose, and ended up with a glob of Kingmaker snot, and flicked it. Roland personally thought he’d never touch that particular dice if he was given the chance. The dice bounced, fell, and revealed a One. “Right on the bullseye.” Roland heard Lofty whisper, and blow on his finger.

The guardsman gaped for a while, then slammed on the table. “T-that’s IMPOSSIBLE! You must’ve manipulated the dice!” Roland couldn’t help but smirk. “You say it like the dice is manipulatable, my man.” Tani nodded, and pointed at the dogfolk. “Yeah! That was your dice! How would we have done that, exactly?”

“Well, I-“ The dogfolk was about to speak when Evan interrupted. “Or… may I guess that you had a trick up your sleeve that didn’t work?” The dogfolk stammered a bit more, but someone from down the staircase spoke up.

“What’s with the commotion?”
It was the Grand High Roller himself, accompanied by a man with dark blue hair, dressed in red robes similar to those of fortune makers. A mask covered half of the latter’s face. A vague sense of déjà vu wormed its way into Roland’s head.

The man crossed his arms. “You know full well not to cause a scene so close to His Eminence’s private chambers, guardsman.” The guardsman bowed. “I apologize, Mandarin!”

Evan addressed Pugnacius, “Master Pugnacius. How glad I am to meet you at last. We were sent here on urgent business by Niall, from the forest. Unfortunately, the guardsman refused to let us in, tricked me into debt—” He pointed at the skinny Duebill, “—and even though we just won the bet, he still won’t let us see you.” “Yeah!” Tani put her hands on her hips. “Is that how Goldpaw treats guests?”

“I see.” The pug tugged on one of his whiskers. “Forgive my foolish underling- deceit is unforgivable here. I will see to it later. Now… for a good friend such Niall to send you, it must be no trifling matter indeed. First, I will annul your debts.” A strike of Pugnacius’ finger, and both Duebills disappeared- wait, both? Batu’s debt was unrelated, Roland thought, so it was illogical for the Grand High Roller to dispel something that would be beneficial to Goldpaw’s finance. Good things never come free of reason. Goldpaw’s leader coughed. “Now, shall we see to our meeting?”

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“You come to ask on Niall’s behalf that I return his forest, you say.” Pugnacius tugged on his whisker as he spoke. “Now, I don’t blame your suspicion when you have witnessed these underhanded methods my guard had used- he will be jailed for his actions- but it was on the dice of the Lady Luck herself that Niall had gambled.”

“Then could it be—” Roland began, but Pugnacius raised a hand. “Now, now. To accuse the mistress of Fortune of trickery is sacrilege to our nation’s most sacred symbol. But to answer your concerns, I shall allow you to examine her. Of course, tread lightly- citizens of Goldpaw would not take such an intrusion lightly.”

The Grand High Roller nodded at Mandarin, and the latter cast out a hand. “His Eminence has spoken all he knows on the topic. You may now take your leave.”

Sharing disappointed stares, Batu and Tani left the palance. When Evan and Roland neared the entrance, Mandarin called out to them. “Sirs, please wait. Would you mind telling me your names? If you were to come around later, the guards would do well to remember them.” They did, and Mandarin hummed. “Evan… and Roland. Heh… Very well. You may leave.”

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“Wahey!” Lofty climbed up onto the statue. “You won’t see a Kingmaker do this any time soon!” “Please, Lofty, check the dice for us.” Evan commented. “You’re our last hope to help Niall get his forest back!” “Already am!” The Kingmaker yelled back. “Cor, this is the biggest flippin’ jumble of wards and charms and magic-repelling doodads I’ve ever seen on a single dice.”

“Any signs of… well, you know, strangeness?” Roland asked. “Not really, nah.” Came Lofty’s reply. Ah, that sucks. “Apart from all the amulets and stuff, it’s just a real nice block of wood. Smooth, shiny- quality wood, this is.”

“So that’s why the pug sent up on this wild goose chase.” Batu huffed. “The darned hound’s hopin’ to see us get lynched by his own people!”
“And we’re right back to square one, too…” Evan sighed. “So w-”

“Hey! You four over there!” An old dogfolk had jogged over. “Don’t you let your pet climb all over Lady Luck! This is an outrage!”

Roland heard Lofty yell something from on the statue, but Evan had stepped in to defuse the situation. “We were sent here by Pugnacius-“ “-And to see if there were any funny business going on!” Tani cut in. That worked, as the citizen nodded. “I see. To hire foreigners to ensure Lady Luck’s impeachable integrity… His Eminence’s dedication is admirable indeed.”

And here comes a chance to shake some more information, Roland thought. He brought his hand to his chin. “It sure is. Say, the statue takes a lot of looking after, doesn’t it? And the die too.” “Yes, yes! Why, only recently, the Grand High Roller saw the decidedly worn state of Lady Luck’s previous die, and had it replaced with the one you see now.” The old man became more excited as he spoke. “And no expense was spared at its making- he dispatched a group of our most respected craftsmen to the deepest parts of the forest to look for the finest wood available!”

That meant there probably was a base in Niall’s forest. “That’s… quite fine of him.” The old dogfolk nodded. “Yes, indeed! But look at me, babbling on like the old man I am. I won’t bother you any longer- you must be quite busy already.”

As the citizen wandered off, Evan mused for a bit. “I’m sure he meant the Forest of Niall… Do we want to report to Pugnacius to make him think we’ve laid the problem aside?” “Doubt if we need it, lad.” Batu responded. “Just walkin’ away would make him think the same. The more we talk the more he’ll suspect. All that he’ll know is that we’ve slunk back to ol’ Niall with tails between our legs.”

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On their return and ensuing enquiry, Niall confirmed that indeed, people have been travelling in and out of the deeper parts of the forest, and granted them a plant-growing spell to let the gang traverse the shortcuts to the Auld Woods, as the Greenling had named it. (“Normally it’d take weeks for those beggars to find thaer way out! You’re lucky to have me on ya side, ye bampots!”)

“Do ye see it, Tani?” Batu asked as he climbed over the last of the mushrooms leading up to a huge branch. “Yeah, I see the house alright.” Tani answered, and Evan quickly nodded as well. Roland had to squint before he could see the darkly-colored building. In situations like these, he wished he hadn’t practically buried his face in books as a kid.

The five dropped down into the clearing in front of the pavilion, and noted the rather fancy architecture of it. If Pugnacius had only sent in his people “recently”, then… “They sure were busy, weren’t they?” Footsteps were heard from from the opposite side of the clearing, and in a frantic rumble the gang hurried to hide behind the tree trunk they had just jumped down from.

Two dogfolk, dressed in similar green robes and hats, followed each other to the entrance of the place, lugging bags and one of them started whining as they put them down. “Oof… why did they build the factory so far away from town? We can only buy dried food and lukewarm drinks like this- I’m already missing the hot-streaker noodles…” The other dogfolk patted the other on the shoulder. “You’re a fool. Build it any closer, and the rest of the citizens would surely find out. We’ll have plenty of chances to try the best noodles once all the dice are replaced, yes?”

“These are definitely from Goldpaw.” Evan noted. Batu stood up, “Aye, and I’ve got a mighty fine idea.” Tani looked at him. “Am I thinking what you’re thinking, pops?” “Ye’re damned right ye are, girlie.”
He cracked his knuckles, and walked into the clearing. Two cries of alarm were quickly cut short by walloping, and Roland instinctively covered the two kids’ eyes.

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Oh, right, and assault, too, Roland thought as he heaved the bags of food in his arms. Batu and Tani had decided to stay behind to keep watch over the two unconscious dogfolk (and to apply soreaway, at Evan’s request). Evan put a hand on the door’s handles.

“Are you ready, Roland?” “Yeah.”

The investigators, now disguised as factory workers, pushed the doors open and began their search.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 16! Doing a bit of a flashback narration was something I came up with when writing this chapter- the cutscenes were kinda all over the place geographically. I was thinking of something to spice it up, and the idea of implying Lofty's idea from last chapter was to beat the guards up and enter the palace happened. So there it was. Unfortunately this being an entire fic I can't exactly provide the narration as I'd imagined it (mostly like cutscenes, I guess), but I hope my saying that would be a good substitute.

Wonder how many stars all that would get them if this was some kind of GTA game, haha.
The two stood in the doorway, locating the different rooms. As they did, a single dogfolk walked by, stopped, and starting staring at them suspiciously. Evan stepped closer to Roland and whispered, “D-did we blow our cover already?” Roland observed the dogfolk. She was… looking at the bags he was holding. Ah, right. He was an employee here, tasked with transporting food from Goldpaw. It took almost weeks to do so. In the very short amount of time he’d been holding them, he’d found that a single one was terribly heavy- and he was holding onto six.

Now, what would a very tired, mildly annoyed twenty-year-old Roland do…

He dropped the bags in a huff. Evan stared at him as he opened his mouth and yelled.

“ALRIGHT! WHICH ONE OF YOU IDJITS THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA TO BUY TWENTY DARNED POTTSTICKERS IN ONE GO?”

The factory stirred, and the workers ran out to them. “Oh, that’s me!” One of them answered, excitedly rifling through the bags. “Thank the lucky stars you’ve bought them for me- Last time I asked for five and they were gone in a week!” “You should see the face he makes when he was told to eat plain bread.” A round of laughter, and the dogfolk that was staring at them earlier patted the two infiltrators on their shoulders. “Good work. We’ll take your portion to your worktables when we’re done sorting them out. Go take a breather.”

The dogfolk were taking foods and other boxes out and passing them along, and Roland nodded to the most-likely-superior, then to Evan. “Thank you. Let’s go.”

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The two entered one of the rooms, and immediately noticed the basketfuls of the same rigged dice that they had seen. Lofty wiggled out from under Evan’s hat.

“I’ve half a mind to take your Leafbook and snap it for all to see, Evan lad.” He jumped onto the floor, where a few pieces of paper had scattered. “So what we lookin’ for, smarty?” Roland picked up a paperback book, inspecting it. “Two major pieces of evidence: one that accounts Pugnacius as directly linked the trickery- some signed document would be good, and one that explains how they manipulate the dice. Lofty said it- the statue’s dice is covered in magic repellents, so there should be… hm. A gadget that can control the dice from a distance.” He squinted at the words, and realised that he didn’t recognise a single one of them. “I, uh, I think I have to delegate finding the document to you, Evan.”

Evan nodded. “Gladly.” He walked to the nearest bookshelf and started lifting and peeking at the papers. Lofty waddled over to Roland. “Don’t know Goldpaw language, do you?” “I don’t. Pretty unhelpful of me, I know…” “Hands and knees on the ground, mun.” What, did Lofty want him to beg for forgiveness? Lofty pointed on the floor again. “On the ground, Roland, you know I’m short.” Raising an eyebrow, Roland did so reluctantly, and Lofty hummed. “Alright, that’s good enough.” Evan turned around to see the bizarre scene, and tilted his head. “U-uh, Lofty?” Lofty hushed him and leaped, flicking Roland’s forehead with his fingers. “Ow! Why, you-“ The Kingmaker sighed and picked up a piece of paper from the ground. “Go read me this, w’you?”
Cursing Lofty mentally, he snatched the paper in a huff. “Account of financial expenses, Month of the Twin Tigers—” He blinked. Wait a minute, he didn’t know any of these before. “Lofty, did you…?” “Damn right.” Lofty smirked. “Stuffed the entire dictionary of Goldpaw in youer brain, and a few others. Yoell know to thank me later.”

“Kwai Qin, you there?” One of the employees knocked on the open door, and swearing, Lofty dove into Roland’s sleeve. “Uh… Kwai Qin?” The employee walked closer, almost stepping carefully. “W-why are you on all fours on the ground?”

“I, uh…” Quick, make an excuse. He stood up, holding the piece of paper. “Was just picking up this. It was stuck in the crack of the floorboards, you see.” “I see…” The employee- Ying Pan, Roland saw on the other’s uniform- stared at the ground and fiddled with his fingers. “Well! I know it’s a day off for you two because you were on food duty, but I need your help, Kwai! I-I think I might’ve misplaced one of the control devices…” Ooh, a device? Now that’s interesting. “I’m a bit colorblind, I can’t see the red tube, so I need your help before someone finds out. Please?”

“Calm down, Ying. Of course I’ll find it for you. Where did you last see it?” Ying Pan lightened up immediately at Roland’s answer. “Oh! Thank you! Come with me, please.” The employee turned around, and Roland mouthed “Keep looking” at Evan before following Ying Pan to the room on the other side of the factory.

It was a manufacturing room, Roland realised, and it was bustling with employees, dogfolk and humanfolk alike. They gathered around tables, chomping on dumplings and pointed at design graphs, discussing. The one that had ordered 20 potstickers looked up from one, munching on the huge bun. “Hey, Kwai, man! Aren’t you off duty today?” “Yeah! Just seeing how much progress you’ve made since last time.” Roland called back, keeping his pace. The employee took a bite and waved, turning away. “Don’t keep your hopes up! I’ve done nothing at all!” The employees around the table laughed and returned to their discussion.

As Ying Pan led Roland to a table, he could see it immediately. A red cylinder with a black knob sat on the far corner of it. Perfect chance. “Do you see it?” Ying said gently. Roland pretended to hum. “I don’t see it on the table… I’ll look under it.” He held his hands on the far side of the table and stooped, pretending to lean on the wooden contraption for support. Ying did the same, and Roland felt Lofty reach out and take the device, stuffing it with the Kingmaker in his sleeve. Nice.

“I… I don’t think I see it.” Roland said and stood up. “I’m pretty sure someone else’s picked it up already, so don’t worry too much about it, alright?” The dogfolk nodded. “Yeah… Thank you. I’ll start making one in case I did lose it.”

Roland nodded, left the room, and saw Evan doing the same. The half-Grimalkin waved and pointed at his hat, and whispered, “I got it.” Quietly, they opened the main doors and sneaked out, as though they had never entered it to begin with.

Batu and Tani were sitting cross-legged on a pile of rocks- that wasn’t there before- in the middle of the clearing, one hand on chin and the other on their weapons. As Evan and Roland closed the door, the two sky pirates looked up and jumped onto the ground.

“What took ye so long?” Batu rested the hammer on his shoulder. “W-what happened? We weren’t gone for long.” Evan asked, and Tani slid off as well. “Took you enough time for a rock golem to traipse over. But that’s not the point: did you get what we need?”

Evan took off his hat and took out a piece of paper, and everyone gathered around. “It’s a list of instructions to how to make and distribute dice.” The king explained, pointed at the signature in lower left corner of the paper, “And here’s Sir Pugnacius’ personal signature: I can recognize it.”

“But you didn’t do anything.”

The two changed back into their normal clothes, and leaving the uniforms on top of the still-incapitated employees along with more soreaway and a small bag of guilders, the gang left.

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“Oh, you’d like to accuse me of tricking Niall and my men?” Pugnacius looked tired. “What evidence do you have, hmm? Some ingenious device in Lady Luck? But we all know that’s impossible. Lady Luck will attest to that.”

“Drop the act, ye-“ Batu started, and Roland held up a hand. “Will she, now? Hm. That’s not a bad idea. She’s used to passing judgements on legal matters like these, right? How does a trial sound?” That piqued the Grand High Roller’s interest. “Yes, that sounds like a very fine idea indeed… Yes, indeed. Lady Luck has ruled over of all of Goldpaw’s decisions- political, legal, all of them, by the roll of the sacred dice.” So confident, huh? “Very well.” Pugnacius stood up. “As leader of Goldpaw, I am more than happy to submit myself to Lady Luck’s judgement. But know this: If I am found innocent, I will see to it that your attempts at sedition are treated with the gravity they deserve.”

“We do.” The group confirmed.

“Then we will give you time to prepare: one hour.” Mandarin, having been silent for most of the meeting as was previously, spoke up. “After the one hour, speak to me. I shall act as host of the trial.”

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“Thank you so much, Persha.” Roland said as he took the suit jacket from the Grimalkin seamstress. “It must been quite the hassle to clean.” “Oh, not at all!” She smiled. “I must thank you for helping King Evan- this is the least I can do.”

They had temporarily settled down in the inn, and Evan, to his joy, had found a Grimalkin that had escaped the coup at Ding Dong Dell and had taken up shelter and a job at the Goldpaw inn. When Persha heard that they were preparing for a trial, she had insisted that she do something, so Roland requested that she do something about his suit, which since last time had gathered quite a number of scorch marks.

He put the jacket on, releasing a breath at the familiar feeling of the fabric. Now… he felt like a professional. “How is it, Mister Roland?” Persha asked. “It’s great- you did an superb job. I must pay you back after the trial is over.” “No, please! I’ve never seen fabric like this- it helped me learn a lot. It’s more than worth the work, trust me.”

Seems like she didn’t exactly want to stay on the subject, so he made a mental note to pay via the innkeeper and turned around to the others, who were fiddling with the device Lofty had nabbed. “How’s the progress?” He asked, and Evan looked up. “We’ve found out the black knob can be turned. Four directions: and there’s a marking on one side of it.” “Feels to me that it’s for front, left,
right, back. Front’s where the mark is.” Batu added.

“The hour’s almost over, my guests.” The innkeeper lady poked her head around the door.

Evan stood up. "Are you ready, Roland? You'll be talking for the most of the trial." "Yes."

Roland collected himself and began to leave the room. As he passed the other four, they followed, and with the words of luck from the two inn staff, the group left the inn to walk towards the square.

There was a wind blowing in the streets, and Roland straightened his jacket. He’d had plenty of experience performing at his best, and this will be no exception.

Chapter End Notes

Never catch me not finding an excuse to skip boss battles, haha.

Thank you for reading chapter 17! Kwai Qin and Ying Pan are derived from names of districts in Hong Kong. I'll give you kudos if you find out which ones they are. True 20-year-old Roland'd probably swear, but Evan's there.

Now, I guess yall are curious why the employees didn't even recognize Roland: they don't really look up from their work, so they're just recognizing by voice. Maybe. Heh.
“May all who watch on be silent but Lady Luck!” Mandarin announced. “The trial of Fortune of Sir Pugnacius, the Grand High Roller will begin at once.” As much of a show trial Pugnacius had thought it to be, he had still decorated the square quite formally. The five stood on a low wooden platform on one side of the statue, and Pugnacius stood on the other. Citizens of Goldpaw gathered in front of the two platforms.

“As His Eminence stands as the defendant, he will not be able to preside over this hearing. This duty will fall to me instead. Please pardon my doubtlessly clumsy efforts in this most unfamiliar role.” Mandarin continued, “Now, before we begin… may I ask this man: what is this bizarre getup that you bear?”

The eyes of the audience followed the host’s point to Roland. Evan glanced up at him worriedly, but this did not faze the man in the least. “This is a court of law, sir. It is a sign of respect in my culture that I dress as such.”

“Very well.” Mandarin turned to face the statue. “May I explain the circumstances of this trial. Our defendant, the Grand High Roller, Sir Pugnacius, stands accused of dereliction of duty, specifically: the knowing deception of his people.” Murmurs rose in the crowd. “With this, we shall allow the prosecuting begin by making their case.”

Roland nodded, and stepped forward. “I intend to prove to this court that with the aid of a network of his most trusted retainers, Master Pugnacius did knowingly and willingly defraud the very people with whose care he is entrusted. To prove this, I will show that he distributed devices among his accomplices, used to carry out deception on a grand scale through manipulation of dice rolls.”

“A word before you begin.” Pugnacius demanded. “I do not doubt or deny that you have found evidence of some… trifling chicanery among lower-level officials, but to allege that this administration as a whole is complicit in such behaviour is preposterous. I have not, and will never engage in any dishonest practises of any kind, and to accuse me of such is to defame my character and call my good name into question!”

Let’s see about that. “Perhaps you will permit those present to withhold judgement on the matter of your innocence until we have presented our proof.” Roland turned to Evan and nodded, and the latter passed him the list of instructions. He held the paper out.

“Mister Mandarin, may I present you this set of instructions with Pugnacius’ official signature as evidence?” Take that, Grand High Roller.

Mandarin walked over, took the paper and read it. “This is indeed as the prosecution has said: a set of written instructions for the assembly and distribution of manipulable dice, with His Eminence’s official signature.” Weird that he isn’t backing Pugnacius up, Roland thought. The Grand High Roller practically jumped with shock, and the audience rustled. “What is the meaning of this, Mandarin?!” The pug yelled. “You-“

“Does the accused have anything to say in his defence?” Mandarin interrupted. “Of course! I-“ Pugnacius coughed. “Only that my prior outburst was merely an expression of shock at the brazenness of this shameless act! I have never seen this document before! This is an act of forgery,
“Why don’t we let Lady Luck be the judge of that?” Roland asked, and Pugnacius immediately settled. “By all means.”

“It seems that both sides are satisfied to entrust judgement on this matter to the Mistress of Fortune. Let the roll be even if this evidence is false, and odd when it is the truth.” He raised his arms. “May the die roll stand as the undisputed word of truth!”

The statue clanked to life- could it detect motion? Roland wondered- and dropped the die in its hand onto the centre of the square. “Look!” Evan whispered and pointed at Pugnacius. “He’s put his other hand behind his sleeve.” The die bounced onto a five, then abruptly flipped on itself to show a six. “Even!” Pugnacius declared, almost smirking. “This evidence is false. Lady Luck has spoken!”

Too bad, as Lofty snapped the bulb on his own device at Evan’s signal. The dice shook, then fell to show a three. The murmurs in the crowd became louder. The Grand High Fraud shook his head and visibly brought out the device, pushing on it. The dice shook again and fell to a two. A One. Four. It rolled twice to a Three. As the dice bounced around on the square, the people started yelling and pointing at the dice. This was good. Roland walked to the railing of their platform and rested a hand on it. “Attention, citizens of Goldpaw!” He declared. “This display is the crux of the prosecution’s case: Master Pugnacius knowingly manipulated Lady Luck!”

In shock, Pugnacius dropped the device, which rolled away from him, and in a leap, Tani had jumped to it and picked it up. “And this remote control thingy is how he did it!”

The crowd cried out in anger, and Mandarin brought out a staff of sorts to hit the floor to quell the floor. “SILENCE! The prosecution has yet to fully explain the forms of proof and their origins!” He turned to the prosecuting side. “Please.”

Ignoring Pugnacius’ stammering, Roland turned to the audience. “In investigating possible fraud of the dice used in the state-run casinos, the prosecution was able to visit the place where the dice and these devices were manufactured.” He took their device from Lofty and held it out for the citizens to see. “And therefore, one of these devices could be procured for its own purposes: namely, the demonstration of this fraud.”

“Master Pugnacius deliberately kept taxes high and stole a forest from his neighbour and friend, Niall!” Evan joined in. “And all using this horrible trick!” The crowd was roaring now. “I can’t believe it!” “Cheat! Deceiver!” “Shame on you, Grand High Roller!” The cries continued for a while, then Pugnacius slammed his sceptre on the ground.

“Silence... SILENCE!” A strange purple aura bloomed upwards around Pugnacius- wait, hadn’t Roland seen that before? “All that I did... I did for Goldpaw!” The aura expanded in tendrils, warping its surroundings. “I had to make my nation rich... richer than any other! It was the only way!” A roar from the distant skies, and something flew towards Goldpaw. A green lion-dragon hybrid, with a red mane and wings- “Longfang?!” The crowd exclaimed. “That’s... that’s our Kingmaker!” “Why is it here?”

The aura weakened, and Pugnacius stumbled forward, hands on rails. “Longfang... in this city? But why...” “Your right to rule has been tested.” Mandarin was beside the king of Goldpaw in an instant. “Your responsibilities as king are found wanting!” The same purple light consumed Mandarin, and in its place a snake-headed figure appeared, hand clawed and wreathed in shadowy energy. “Sloth is your downfall- your Kingsbond is mine!”

The traitor’s hand disappeared into the king’s chest and amidst his screams, brought out a glowing
red line- a Kingsbond, ripping it in an instant. Longfang roared and Roland watched the Kingmkaer crash-land on the palace. The citizens began screaming and evacuating the square, whereas the snake-headed man disappeared among the confusion. “Cor, this ain’t good…” Lofty muttered. “Nay, not good at all!” “What do you mean, Lofty?” Evan asked. Lofty ran forward. “Kingsbonds are what’re needed to keep a lid on us Kingmakers’ powers while we’re physically here! Without it…”

Longfang climbed over the palace and roared. Soot and fire covered the sky.

“Ol’ Bitey’s losing control!” Lofty declared. “Get ready, muns: we’re in for a thrashing!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 18! There was a bit of delay in posting this chapter, as I did this together with a couple more.

As from last chapter, i’ve received a few comments that Lofty was depicted as smaller than he looks in cutscenes. As I had found out in rewatching, I have indeed misjudged the size of Lofty: quoting my previous replies, Lofty is about as tall as 3/4s of Evan's legs are long, but I have ended up thinking him as barely reaching Evan's knees. Another point is on probably how Lofty fitted in the Goldpaw employee uniform's sleeves: You can refer to the comments for a longer explanation.
Longfang

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A wave of ash blasted into them. Roland kept his eyes shut, struggling to balance himself in the
wind, and he could hear the others grunting and doing the same. Then the wind subsided, and in its
place he could feel sweltering heat. He looked. They were in a lava field- to be exact, they were on a
piece of flat rock, surrounded by lava and volcanoes.

“Blimey…” Tani commented. “Where are we? We aren’t in Goldpaw, are we?” “No!” Lofty
answered. “It’s an inter-dimensional dimension- a representation of Longfang, en’t it! And it’ll eat up
this whole kingdom if we don’t smack the sense back into ‘im!”

Longfang rose up from the lava, snarling and screeching. “Are ye kidding?” Batu exclaimed. “That
there ain’t just a Kingmaker- that’s a kingmaker gone doolally! A blessed realmwrecker! How are
we goin’ to do that?”

The berserk Kingmaker raised its arms and slammed it on the platform, opening its mouth to breathe
a wave of fire at them. “Move, move!” Batu yelled, ducking to the left and pushing Evan with him.
Roland dove to the right, and he heard Tani do the same behind him. As he picked himself up, he
could smell smouldering leather and rubber- his shoes, unadapted to fighting, was smoking from
barely avoiding the heat. The middle of the platform was now glowing red-hot. As he turned to both
avoid the smell of burning plastic and watch Longfang’s movements, his eyes caught onto
something.

An unnaturally gold shine on the front of the realmwrecker’s left paw. His son told him once: when
Roland’d had a rare day off and been persuaded to try a video game.

“See that glowing spot? That’s a weak spot. Hit it!”

He brought his sidearm out and fired. Longfang screeched, which should be an indication that the
same rule applied to it.

“That’s how you do it!” Roland heard Lofty yell from his left. “Realmwreckers are Kingmakers
that couldn’t keep a lid on their power, yeah? That power gotta fly somewhere, and those
somewheres are the right places to hurt!”

Almost immediately, he saw an arrow whistle past him into the shining spot- then Tani fired off
another arrow, and another. Batu and Evan followed it up with more arrows and a well-aimed
watersphere. But Longfang was not one to just sit there and take the punishment. It jumped back
into the lava, where its paws were submerged under the molten rock, and roared. Roland continued
shooting, hoping that the damage would register.

It was then that Tani yelled, “Rocks! Above!” and Roland saw the patch of ground below him light
up. Drat. He jumped back as a lump of red-hot rock smashed into where he just was. As more of the
rocks blocked the view and took up the already tight spaces, Roland heard Batu letting off a loud
curse, followed by the crack and crumbling of boulders. Another curse followed- this time from
Lofty.

“Cor, don’t hit them! They’re Higmakers!” “What?” Tani yelled, hacking away at one of the rocks
with her lance. “Higmakers, mun! Higgledies born from the power of Kingmakers! Mighty
powerful, they are, and we all need to have them on our side!”

The boulder Roland was working on crumbled into embers, and a red Higgledie wearing a strangely tribal mask bounced out of it, rubbing its head and squeaking. A few more squeaks echoed from all around the platform, and a group of Higmakers gathered in the front of the platform, raising their hands.

“Wha-“

A burst of fire warped around the platform. A barrier had enveloped the latter, fully blocking out a fire breath from Longfang. In trying to clear out the obstacles, they'd forgotten about Longfang. And they didn’t have any Fire-based Higgles, so…

Lofty whistled. “They’re right powerful, mun.”

As the Higmakers waved and dissipated into sparks, Longpaw attempted to slam its claws onto the slab of rock again, the weak spot on the right paw this time. Seeing the opportunity, Evan rushed in to stab it. Howling, the realmwrecker swept its left arm at the young king, but Batu was there to counter it, smacking it aside with the hammer, then using the rebound to swing the hammer down onto the gleaming spot. The Realmwrecker squealed, flinging its head up in pain. “Roland, come on!” Tani ran, docking more arrows on her bow to join in the assault, but Roland noticed Longpaw hadn’t stopped looking up. An ember flicked upwards from its head. “Get out of there!” He yelled, holding up his gun. Without Higmakers they had no defence against the fire, and with the reach of it from the last two demonstrations, it was very likely they’d get hit anyway...

He needed something to interrupt its action. If he could pull something off… like last time. A tingling feeling trailed down from his fingers, and an orb of dark purple gathered at the tip of the gun. So that was the source of the explosion he saw back in the sewers- but it looked a lot larger here... He dismissed the thought and fired. The orb hit Longfang in the face and expanded, knocking the monster back. Fire spewed from it into the air, then it fell face-forward onto the platform, a bright golden hue surrounding its head. Almost like those stars-above-head expressions one’d see in cartoons.

A new weak spot: a chance, they all recognised, and in the few moments the realmwrecker was down, they whaled on the head with whatever attacks they could think of. Then Longfang picked itself up, the glow weakening on its head. It flapped its wings and tried to rise, although it was clearly wobbling and slow. “Are ye kidding me?” Batu roared. “All that, and it ain’t even toast?”

“Batu! I have an idea!” Evan yelled. “Do you still have the strength to launch something- someone into the air with your hammer?” “Yes, w- If ye’re thinking that, ye’re out of yer mind, boy!” “I need to try! We have to stop it now!” Evan raised his staff into the air. “Aqua!” Another watersphere zoomed up into the air. Batu rested his hammer on the ground, and as Evan jumped on it in a running leap, he flung it, along with the half-Grimalkin into the air. With almost perfect coordination, Evan brought his sword up into the watersphere, then down, jamming the water-imbued sword straight into Longfang’s forehead, where the weak spot was still present.

An echoing scream, and Longfang’s body became wreathed in blue light. It grew brighter, and brighter, and…

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They were back in Fortune Square. Batu caught Evan as the latter fell, and placed the young king gently on his feet. “Great job, lad.” The pirate said, then looked up. “This here… is the square, ain’t it?” “I’m sure it is.” Tani affirmed, “Well, we’re back, sooty, smelly and absolutely
exhausted.” “Should we go talk to Pugnacios?” Evan suggested, “I mean, like Tani said, we’re sooty, we probably stink, but—"

“Excuse me!” A dogfolk clad in golden armor ran to them. “You have calmed the Kingmaker?” “Yes, fortunately.” Evan nodded, “And, uh… who are you?”

The dogfolk bowed. “Ya Pi, general of Goldpaw’s army, at your service. I speak on Pug… His Eminence’s behalf.” “How is he?” The young king asked, and Ya Pi’s face fell as he answered, “Weak, but recovering. He has requested an audience with you if you return, but…” The general’s gaze wandered around the five. “Seeing your condition, I find it more appropriate that you first rest, then speak to His Eminence. He should be back in the palace by then.” He bowed again. “I speak this from the bottom of my heart: thank you for saving Goldpaw. The citizens of Goldpaw owe their lives to you as well.”

“The goldie has a point.” Batu hummed as the general left. “Might want to crash at the inn—m’ arms are startin’ to sore.” Evan chuckled. “I’m really sorry, Batu.” “Not yer fault, lad for saving our hams. Not at all.”

The group began to walk down the street, but when Roland began to follow, Lofty psst-ed at him. “Over ’ere, mun.” Roland walked over and in his surprise, saw the Kingmaker’s serious expression. “Your move back there was irregular, you hear?” Lofty whispered. “That was a right powerful one—shouldn’t be in yer mileage to hav’it. I don’t know how you did that, and you helped Evan lad, but…” His eyes glanced to Roland’s right. “I might want to be more careful with using it if I were you.”

Roland watched Lofty with confusion as the latter followed the group out of the square. Did he mean… he brought up his right hand, and stiffened. His right hand still shaped like a hand, but it was translucent, and within it was a lazily swirling mass of dark greens, purples and reds. He tugged the sleeve up his arm, and saw that the strange condition stopped just past his wrist, bordered by a purple line.

“Roland?” Evan had noticed Roland hadn’t caught up to the group yet and waved from the square’s entrance. He gave a shout in reply, and hurried to follow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 19! Here's our first Kingmaker fight, and I hope it's up to y'all's standards. And also, with this, I've hit the 30k word mark! Here's to more!

Roland's fighting in his suit, yes. And I've ended up keeping the fight short because, well, that's most of the attack sequences Longfang does, so thought it'd get boring. Technically whatever Roland did would look like a hypercharged Heavy Ammo.

I've somehow started imagining Batu saying "Boy" a la God of War, and now I'm unable to get it out of my head. Help me.
In his dream, Roland was seated in his office yet again. The wind howled outside. The mystery person was hunched over in front of the window. The cup of tea on the table was still piping steam into the air, but the room… smelled different. Like humidity and rain.

“Hey...”

No response.

He stood up from his chair and walked closer. As he did, Roland realised the hood the mysterious person was wearing wasn’t exactly a hood- they were two pieces of overlapping cloth, now loosened and messily draped over the person’s head. And with the cloths not being able to keep their hair back, Roland could now see messy silver hair reaching down to the person’s back.

Roland’d expected them to notice him immediately as he approached, but the person was still frozen at the window, breaths shuddering. There was no mask. Gingerly, he stood behind them and placed a hand on his companion’s shoulder. “Hey-“

He felt a very hard object pummel the left of his head, and he toppled sideways into the bookshelves. The room’s lights fizzled and went out, casting it in darkness- Then he was lying face up on a bed, staring at the ceiling. He raised his hand to knead his forehead, groaning, and slipped out of bed, walking to the inn’s balcony. He leaned on the railings, stretching his neck. There was still a dull ache on the side of the head where the person in his dream had hit him with their shackles.

He should’ve known better than to do that. If he’d still be able to meet them, he’d make sure to apologize.

He remembered that in the few moments he was on the ground, he had seen the face of the person, but that had already slipped out of reach. And there was something he remembered clearly. As he had tumbled to the office floor, he heard it, saw it. Strange details: A wild, horrified gaze, but with no tears. And a desperate whisper devoid of strength.

“What happened to him?”

Roland watched the dogfolk walk in the streets below the balcony, vaguely feeling himself clench his fists. He tried to remember- but what did they look like? What did they mean by what they said? As he stared at the street, his eyes caught onto his right hand- still in its peculiar colour. He flexed it. It moved fine. He prodded it. There was no feeling in it. His mind flipped to what Lofty warned him. Now he thought of it, it was true- when all of their previous attacks had barely made Longfang flinch, a single skill from Roland should never had managed to knock it out of an attack. Especially since he was from a world without magic, to achieve that should be much beyond his calibre, and the repercussions showed. Now, the pressing question: Why was he able to pull it off? Why the hell was he able to pull it off?

He was tapping his fingers on the railing now in impatience. So many questions and yet he could provide no answers at all. This wasn’t like him. His jaw began to ache- he needed a distraction. Right, a distraction: the trial. His suit was now formally out of commission from all the burn marks and soot, but he’d managed to be a prosecutor, then fight a divine creature in the same suit and shoes.
An impressive feat, and he wished his son- he'd wanted to become a lawyer- was there to see all of it-

He wished his son was there to see it.

His breath hitched. No, no, that wasn’t what he was supposed to think. He ran his fingers through his hair, gritting his teeth. That wasn’t what he was supposed to think about! What he needed was a distraction from himself, not a hole to dig himself deeper into! He shouldn’t have to wallow in emotions, now that he’d pledged-

“Roland?”

He froze, then looked back to see Evan standing at the balcony doorway. Roland smiled. “Can’t sleep, Evan?” “Not really…” Evan chuckled sheepishly, walking and standing next to Roland, who consciously covered his hands from view. “I’m used to sleeping when it’s all quiet and dark outside- can’t really let myself wind down here, unfortunately.”

“I see.” A moment of thought. “Your attack was spectacular today, Evan.” That was the truth. Evan laughed, “Oh, but that was with Batu’s help. And if we all haven’t weakened him enough, I don’t think that attack would’ve ended the fight, either.”

Silence drifted between them for a while as they watched the citizens move below the balcony. The tension in Roland's stomach untwisted a little.

“You’re grieving, aren’t you?” Evan asked.

Roland felt his stomach lurch at the question. “Huh?”

Evan looked at Roland, as though he could see right through the latter. “My father was like that too. My mother died when I was very young, and…” The young half-Grimalkin turned to observe the streets. “I could see it quite often. My father would do something, maybe something he enjoyed, and suddenly, he’d freeze. Pause for a few moments, then turn to everyone, smiling and saying everything was fine. I g-” He opened his mouth to say something, but quickly said something else. “He still did it before he passed away.”

“...I’m sorry for your loss.” Roland didn’t know what to say.

Evan shook his head. “I didn’t mean it like that.” His tail swayed. “I-I don’t really know what you’re going through, Roland, and… I’m not going to make you tell me. If you want to, I’m willing to listen, but… well, if you want to, I can stand here with you.”

Roland turned away to fix his gaze on the street below, suddenly feeling deflated. “Th…” He cleared his throat. “Thank you, Evan.”

They stood for a long while, watching the crowds float in and out of view. Before long, the two heard yawning and ruffling in the room, and they went back in the room to prepare for their audience with Pugnacius.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 20! A quick breather chapter.
From how Roland's been president for a while as well as the speed of which he clamps onto the idea of helping Evan, I see him as someone who prides himself on being able to provide answers, and also is very used to having to juggle projects and ideas; and over time, he uses it to divert his mind from more unpleasant thoughts. Something like "I'm still fine, I can do this and this, etc.". And when it doesn't work, he gets pretty stressed. Not a healthy way to let his troubles snowball behind him, honestly.

Also a quick mention at Evan's dad, since he doesn't get a lot of mention until much later.
Tying up loose ends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh!” Pugnacius half-jumped off his throne when the group entered the palace- which caused Ya Pi to hurry to his side, but quickly recollected himself. “You are alive and well, I see.” He muttered a word or two, and looked up. “I have done the unforgivable…” “That ye have.” Batu said. “Tell us, what got ye to do it?” Pugnacius bowed. “I had a desire to lift my kingdom out of poverty… it consumed me, and by my actions, I have turned it into endless greed… and that weakness made me vulnerable. He exploited it…”

“Who was he?” Evan asked. “The one who stole your kingsbond… Mandarin, was it?”

“Yes, that was Mandarin.” The Grand High Roller tugged on a whisker. “He visited Goldpaw some months ago. He promised secret knowledge- knowledge of ways our nation could be made greater without having to lift more than a finger, and in return, he sought high office. That very knowledge was the manipulation of dice, and it was he who persuaded the implementation of it.” He shook his head. “I… I know not when I had fallen under his spell. How could I have let it happen…?”

“What about your Kingmaker?” Roland asked. He’d remembered to wear a pair of gloves. “We managed to calm it down, but… without your kingsbond, wouldn’t your place of king be… forfeit? Will things here be okay?” Pugnacius nodded in answer. “You have bought us time. Longfang will sleep for a while yet. If he awakens, then he will seek to destroy our kingdom once more, without the influence of the kingsbond.”

“The question now is why the man called Mandarin sought to target the kingsbond specifically.” Ya Pi spoke up. “If he wanted to attack Goldpaw, then he should have attacked its people too. But why only the Kingsbond…?” Seeing a silence fall in the palace, the general coughed. “Forgive me, I have spoken out of place.”

“No, you have brought up an interesting point.” Pugnacius noted. “But the fact that Goldpaw is still safe is good enough… for now. Perhaps later, you can seek Lady Boddly’s advice.” He turned to the visitors, not seeing Ya Pi’s mild grimace. “I remember your initial goal was that I return Niall’s forest?” “Yes.” Evan nodded. “I haven’t been able to introduce myself until now- I am Evan Pettiwhisker, of the House of Tildrum.” “I see. Either way, I have already sent a messenger to Niall to inform him of the returning of the forest.”

“Thank you, Master Pugnacius, but that’s not all.” Evan held his hand at his chest. “I have formed a pact with the kingmaker in the Cradle of Light, and mean to found a new nation in the Heartlands. For the sake of your kingdom… for your kingsbond… will you help us?” “Ah, so that is what I sensed in you…” Pugnacius hummed. “It was plain to me from the start you were no ordinary child. But what is it that you propose?”

“I want to protect our world.” The young king declared. “I want to make sure nobody else has to lose what’s most important to them. And I want you help me.” The Grand High Roller nodded. “I will do all that I can. I fear he who stole my Kingsbond will not be satisfied with mine alone- So we must stand together with our brother nations, or lose all dear to us. So… I will return all that I stole. I will see that Goldpaw rise again- this time, with the right intentions, with its people. I wish good fortune in your quest, friend.”
He nodded at Ya Pi, who stepped forward. “His Eminence has spoken all that he will. If there will be nothing else, you may take your leave.”

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To say Niall was overjoyed was an understatement.

“Oh, yes, ye Bonnie, Bonnie wee beauties, you! I was snoozin’ this morning when this young dogfolk came right runnin’ in and handed me a paper, stamped and signed by Auld Pug that my forest was, to quote, officially and formally returned!” Niall jumped and practically danced a circle. “Go on, knock yerselves out with them trees! Get all the trees ye want!”

“Keep your hair on, Niall.” Tani laughed. “There’s a quick question we’d like to ask you.”

“Yeah?” Niall coughed and stood straight again. “Go on, knock me out!”

Tani crossed her arms. “Pugnacius got his kingsbond stolen by a creepy snake-headed weirdo. You’re real old, right? Any chance you know something about him?” “Stolen?!” Niall threw his arms up again. “Jings! The Kingmaker must’ve been taering the place ta pieces!” “Aye, it wanted to, sure enough.” Batu patted his chest. “But we taught it a small lesson it won’t be forgetting-Goldpaw’s safe for now.”

“Now stealin’ a Kingsbond’s no mean feat…” The Greenling thought for a while. “Tell me, lads and laddies: He didnae happen tae be infusin’ stuff with an awful fithy fug, did he?” “Yes!” Tani answered. “A purple fog... Aura. Whatever helps you sleep at night.” The group nodded, and Niall clapped his hands once. “That’ll be the Horned One’s doing, then, right enough.” Seeing the four’s confused looks, Niall continued. “The Horned One’s the auld Kingmaker of a place called Allegoria. A nasty piece o’ work, alright- but for someone tae be usin’ the beastie’s powers would have tae mean... Aye. The king of Allegoria was Naverre. That’s got tae be him.”

“So we just have to go to Allegoria, see this Naverre and, ahem, kindly ask him for the kingsbond back, right?” Roland asked, feeling in the mood for sarcasm. Niall shook his head. “Yae’ll have a job doin’ that, sadly. Allegoria hasnae existed for... oh, two thousand or more years now. Disappeared along wi’ the land it stood on.”

“You mean he’s... the king of a country that hasn’t existed for centuries...?” Evan wondered, “That doesn’t make sense- he can’t be alive by now.” “Y-you mean he’s a ghost?” Tani jolted. “Blimey, no wonder he felt right creepy.”

Niall waved his hand for Evan’s attention. “Whatever he is, I reckon he’s lookin’ tae pinch people’s kingsbonds in order tae try and bring the Horned One back somehow. Or Allegoria. Or both. Either way, if he succeeds, the world’ll be filled with the same purple fug before ye can say “We’re DOOMED!”.” So ye better hang onto yer kingmaker safe and sound, young'un.”

“But we have to stop Naverre before he can take other kingsbonds!” Evan exclaimed. “We can’t let him bring back the Horned One!” “Trust me on this, Evan.” Niall smoothed out his beard. “You’ll need more than a kingdom’s worth of strength to stop him- and yours is just starting out, yeah? Might want to start with that.” He waddled past the five and out of the clearing.

“Gonna go on a walk, Niall?” Batu asked. “Nah, I’ll be going wi’ye. Ye’ll be needing my help- I know which wood goes where.” He muttered something- Roland caught onto the word ‘underway’- and turned around. “Wot? Come on, I ain’t got all day.”
New names, new names, hurrah!

Thank you for reading Chapter 21! Technically this is the same chapter as the next one, but like before, there was a bit of a thing with word counts, so I split it in two.
The six returned to the Heartlands to see wooden logs and structures around the plot, people hurrying around to pass bricks, wood and other building materials. There were a lot more people than just three when they were last around.

“Where… where did all these people come from?” Evan asked. “There’s sky pirates… greenlings-gosh, I think I see a few people from Ding Dong Dell, too!” “Ye have me to thank for that, son!” Niall answered, a bit smugly. “I didnae expect so many people to turn up so soon, tae be honest. Put the word out of the street, ye ken? A wee thank-ye’ for getting my auld forest back like.”

As Evan skipped over to shake Niall’s hands in gratitude, Roland mused about how the seemingly old hermit had such a vast network. He really can’t look at someone by their cover, can he? “That’s more than we could have hoped for, Niall.” He said. Niall shook his head- and hands. “Oh, think nothin’ of it. I only ask for the teensy-weeniest of favors in return: make me the Minister of Finance.”

Aye, there blows the cover again. “Um, no offense,” Roland asked, “but don’t you have the record of having lost your entire forest to a bet?” “Hey, that’s because I got tricked, ye hear? There’s none can pinch a penny I can!” “That seems like a great idea!” Evan definitely fell for it. “And what about… Batu for Minister of Defense? He’s good with lead his band of pirates, right?” “The swab in charge o’ fightin’? I like the sound o’ that! Good deal, hahar!”

“What about me?” Tani spoke up. Roland remembered how she had jumped right from a birdmobile with perfect landing and later flew one as well. Birdmobiles… hm. “How does Minister of Air Forces sound?” “I’d thought you’d say something like Minister of Offense, and I’d be in charge of yelling at people!” The pirate girl laughed. “But that’s a right spiffy title. Air Forces… I’ll take it!”

“And that leaves you, Roland.” Evan stated. “Is there anything you’d like take charge of?” Roland brought his hand to his chin. Honestly, as the head of an entire government, he could call himself a jack of all trades. A master of none, that is. “I guess I can be… your advisor. I have a little experience running a country, so I’m sure I can help out here and there.” Evan shook his head at that, answering, “No. You’ll be my Chief Consul. I’m no politician, so I shall need your help.” Now that’s… He hadn’t had the best of records in being a consul, though. A bad one, at that. “That’s… very kind of you, Evan. I just…” An abysmal record. “I don’t know if I’ll be…”

“It’s the king’s job to appoint his ministers, yes?” Evan explained. “Then I hereby appoint you Chief Consul.” Well, no point in backing out of it now. “Heh. Well, all right then- Chief Consul it is.” He bowed, “By royal appointment.” Evan smiled. “Thank you, Roland.” “No problem. Happy to see you take the lead.”

Evan nodded. “I suppose I am. I’m… still not sure if I’m up to the job, but… I have to try.” His smile widened. “And thanks to all of you, I finally feel ready to.” Lofty raised his hand. “One last thing, mun- and I nearly forgot too. We need a proper tidy name for a kingdom we’re building, en’t it? Make it official, like.” The young king nodded. “I’ve been thinking of it, actually.” He took a step back. “I’ve decided to call it… Evermore.” Having announced the name, he exhaled, then grinned. “How does it sound?” The other five murmured in agreement. “Evermore… that’s a nice name.” Roland commented. “I like it. Did you come with it yourself?”

Evermore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
“Not really.” Evan scratched his head sheepishly. “It’s reference to an ancient story- that there was a
great kingdom whose people were so happy that they wished for it to last forever… Whenever I
read it, there was a sentence that I kept thinking about: ‘May hope bless evermore.’. And that’s
where I got the name of my kingdom from.”

“Alright, Mister King!” Tani crossed her arms, grinning. “You’ve named your country- time to
address your adoring citizens, eh?”

She nodded at Batu, who walked to the edge of the mound they stood on and gave a yell. “OI!
Gather ‘round ‘nd listen up, ye mangy curs! King Evan’s got a rousing speech for ye all!”

The people working away at their constructs turned around, then gathered at the base of the mound.
Evan gulped, then walked forward, clearing his throat. This was his first formal audience, after all.
“Thank you all!” He announced. “Building our new kingdom won’t be easy… But we will build it!”
The audience watched on, silent as he continued, “A beautiful, bountiful kingdom, where everyone
can live happily ever after! I want you all to join me on this journey!” The king stepped forward,
hands curling into fists. “The road ahead may be a long one, but at the end of it… there is hope!”

The citizens of Evermore exploded into cheers. “Cor, there’s kingly, you are!” Lofty congratulated
Evan, and the rest gave their own affirming comments. “This is where it all begins…” Evan stated.
“Here and now… Our kingdom.” “And we’re with ye till the bitter end, lad!” Batu patted the king
on his shoulder. “Come hell or high water!”

The sky pirate guffawed once, then turned around and jumped down the mound. “Come on, my
fellow min’sters! We got some buildn’ to help with.”

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Roland dreamt of gentle laughter.

It was the first night since the beginning of the construction project, and Roland was used to seeing
his office. It smelled of tea again- and the mysterious stranger seated in front of him was once more
hooded and masked. It was as though the previous, brief dream never occurred, and even if it did, the
person certainly didn’t show any recognition of it.

“May hope bless Evermore. Heh…” The stranger was chuckling- there was a hint of fondness in
their voice. “Does anything about it interest you?” Roland asked, and the person immediately
became quiet. “Oh. You… It’s nothing.” “Do you want me to congratulate Evan for you?” “No-
there’s no need to, I think.” The person shook his head. “He’s already set himself apart- he’s his own
person now.” As usual, Roland felt he both understood and didn’t understand it. The mysterious
figure looked up. “That isn’t what I want to talk about. Can I… take a look at your hand?”

Hand? Oh, right. He raised his right hand, and found that even in his own dream, it was in the same
condition as was since the fight against Longfang. He put his hand on the table, and the stranger
observed it for a few moments.

“…There’s no mistaking it.” They looked up. “This can be only caused by a Kingmaker.” Roland
frowed. “How do you know?” “Can you come up with a better explanation? I can’t.” Seeing a lack
of reply, the stranger returned to observing Roland’s hand. “A mortal, physical body is unable to
withstand sheer Kingmaker strength- it will disintegrate. As you are now, your body can hold itself
together yet, but if the corrosion spreads further…”

“I’m going to die.” He knew he had to be living on borrowed time somehow.
“I’m sorry.”

“Ah, well. It’s been great knowing you.”

Silence hung in the room.

“It’s Doloran.”

“What?”

They looked up. Any distortions in their voice had disappeared, and Roland could finally hear the other’s voice to be of a male. “My name. It’s Doloran.” Behind the mask, Doloran exuded seriousness. “I’ll do all I can to help you.”

“Hello, Doloran.” Roland almost held his hand out in a handshake, but remembered the other’s hands were still occupied by the shackles. “It’s good to know your name, finally.” He swore he could see the other grimace. Why? Doloran turned away. ”You need to go. It’ll be busy soon. And you need the time to prepare.”

"What-"

The dream began to fade.

"Good luck, Roland."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 22! That wraps up the Goldpaw arc, technically. A couple of things.

1. Honestly, I wasn't exactly very happy with how I handled the last bit of Goldpaw; ran into a bit of a writer's block when I was writing basically chapters 19-22, actually, but here it is? I guess. I hope it's still satisfactory enough, though! Still fun to write about.

2. Just gave Tani a minister job because hey Level 5, why didn't you give her anything to do, my man.

3. Also, Doloran. My dude. Finally stopped being mysterious didnae ye. Thank heck I can stop talking like a cryptid. Remember how he previously said Roland'd know his name eventually? He basically pulled "Oh heck you're gonna die? heck guess I'm telling you m' name then". Or maybe something else. Who knows what prompted him.

I'll go on to play the Hydropolis arc, then come back to write. Probably I'll start spacing out the chapters more now that I'm throwing my full heart into this fic. Wish me luck.
In the months that followed, the entire nation of Evermore busied themselves with building, securing materials and transporting them. It was a surprisingly fast job - sky pirates prided themselves on their mastery with woodwork, and the Greenlings could conjure up vines to help prop up the larger logs. Roland had one experience of badly spraining his back trying to lift a log like all the other sky pirates did, and by the ministers’ advice, had retreated to take responsibility for planning of plots and manpower. (Perhaps being aged down made him forget the dangers that all ages were susceptible to.) He’d taken the opportunity to give Evan one or two lectures on his experience, as he had promised the latter.

But the castle, fort walls and smaller facilities were built one after another, and at last, the various flags and decorations that everyone had made during their recesses could be hung up. They had held a short feast, and everyone had returned to their posts soon after, eager to finally carry out the jobs they’ve been given.

“There’s people at armory and weaponworks… general store’s manned. Might want to find someone who’s good with spellcraft. Sky pirates and co. are already starting research on improving their birdmobiles, huh? Nice.” Roland noticed an empty space on the facilities list he was holding for his preliminary report. “There’s a vacancy for the ministry of Higgledies.”

“Oh! That’s what I wanted to ask about today.” Evan answered. “Remember Auntie Martha?”

“Who’s she when she’s at home?” Tani asked. Evan smiled. “A friend we made on our way to Cloudcoil. You should see how many Higgledie friends she’d made! I’m actually thinking of inviting her to our nation to be the Minister of Higgledies, so if it’s possible, I want to formally visit her today.” He smiled sheepishly. “But we’ve only just started handling all these stores, so…”

“Oh, just leave it to us two pirates!” Batu bumped his chest with his fist. “Havin’ too many people around might scare the lil’ things. Ye’d want to start buildin’ relations with Goldpaw as soon as possible, yeah? Ye better gather a full cabin’ for starters.”

“Thank you, both of you!” Evan turned to Roland eagerly. “Let’s go already!”

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They’d brought along the Higgledies they’d met, and by the time they had gotten to Martha’s cottage - which wasn’t long, thanks to a spell one of the Dell citizens had managed to whip up during construction - the Higgledies were restless.

Evan knocked on the door of the cottage. “Auntie Martha?”

A few moments, and it swung open, revealing a very happy Auntie Martha. “Oh, well! Isn’t it my favourite young men! And you brought your new friends along too! Come in, come in! My lovelies can’t wait to meet them!”

Quickly, they were seated at the main table, and while Martha insisted on making a kettle of tea, the Higgledies that had taken residence in Martha’s cottage gathered around them, curious about the new blobs. Soon, Toby jumped down his usual spot on Roland’s shoulder and started squeaking at another purple Higgledie. A conversation ensued, and suddenly Roland felt himself being pushed
downwards, and Evan yelled. The roof groaned. In a singular cracking noise, the table and the chairs broke together under the gravity, sending the two people, two Higgledies and a pile of plates tumbling to the ground.

Martha turned around at the commotion, completely unaffected- or was it that she had built up a significant resistance to it all? She chuckled at the sight.

“Oh! Dearie me, them purply ones are quite the competitive ones, aren’t they?”

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After helping to sweep aside the debris, Evan and Roland stood, sipping the cups of tea. Having mildly telling off the two Higgledies, Martha strutted back to the middle of the room.

“Um, Auntie Martha?” Evan spoke up. Martha smiled. “Yes, dearie?”

“We've started our new kingdom and I was wondering if you’d like to come and live there!” A wheeze. “We need someone who knows about Higgledies.”

A pause. Auntie Martha smiled warmly, “Do you mind trying that one more time, dear?”

Evan gulped, and Roland raised his hand to pat the king on his shoulder. Evan tried again, taking a deep breath. “We’ve started our new kingdom- it’s called Evermore. We need someone who knows about Higgledies to help our kingdom. We were wondering if you’d like to come and live there.”

“Oh, Evan, my love!” Auntie Martha clapped her hands. “Of course I want to! I’ll be delighted to come and lend a hand if you’ll have me!” One of the blue Higgledies tugged at her dress. “Yes, yes, darling, I remember. Don’t you worry.” She frowned. “There’s just a tiny little complication: someone’s stolen my rub-a-dub scrubber.”

Roland tilted his head. “Rub-a… Come again?”

“My rub-a-dub scrubber, I say!” The old lady wrung her hands. “It’s a scourer- but it’s not any old scrubber! It’ll get even the filthiest old pot sparkling clean with just a swish and a swash! And my higgledy darlings flat-out refuse to be born into anything but the cleanest of cauldrons! So you see… I can’t do anything without it.”

“Gosh… I didn’t know Higgledies can be born from cauldrons!” Evan wondered. “Who stole your cauldron scrubber?”

“A wicked little whamster, that’s who! And with how fast the grubby vermin ran, I’m in no position to chase after him at my age!”

“We’ll get it for you, then.” Roland affirmed. “Do you know where it ran off to?”

“You will? Oh, aren’t you just little dears! Well, it should’ve scurried off to the Grotty Grotto.” Quite the… alliterative name, ain’t it. “There’s an awful lot of them there, so do be careful.”

---

Thanks to the water Higgledie volunteering to be a guide, they found the grotty grotto quite quickly… but there were no whamsters in sight. The cave was empty, silent, stand for a strange door in the middle of it.

“That’s strange…” Evan hummed. “Could the whamsters be hiding behind the door?”
“No. I took care of them.” A voice behind them said.

Evan and Roland spun around to see a woman in blue and gold, toting a pocketwatch on her. She held up a scrubber that sparkled even in the dark. “This what you looking for?” “Yes.” Roland nodded, stepping forward. “can you give it to us? There’s a certain somebody that needs it.” “Not so fast.” The woman held it out of reach before continuing. “I can give it to you, but you have to do me a little favour- both of you.”

She took out a peculiar key on a string. “Take this, and-” “Excuse me, miss-” Roland began, but the woman glared at him, effectively shushing him. “Do not interrupt me, or I shall be forced to dock your marks. This is for you.” She held out the key, and reluctantly, Roland took it. “Are you aware of the mysterious portals around this world, known as the Dreamer’s Doors?”

“I-I have.” Evan raised his hand. “There’s been stories that one can find what they need using these doors.” The woman nodded. “Full marks for the answer. Now, my request: I have long wished to investigate these stories, but I have been unable to bypass the magics that seal them shut.” Suddenly she spread her arms with dramatic flair. “However! I have made a breakthrough- I have created a key to open these very doors: The Dreamer’s key, the one you hold in your hand. A feat I will give myself full marks for.”

“So, uh… what do you want us to do with it?” Roland asked. The woman smiled. “I have been testing what people have been able to take out from Dreamer’s Doors. And today, it is your turn. I want you both to unlock the Dreamer’s Door in this very cave, and stick your hand into it.” Roland inspected the key in his hand. “…sounds dangerous.” “Fear not: I am, as you can surely appreciate, a gifted intellectual, so I have made sure myself that I still have intact hands.” The woman pushed them towards the door. “Now, I want you two to imagine a page, just that. If you can take out something at all, I will give you the scrubber.”

Faced with no choice, the two faced the door. Evan looked back at the lady, whispering, “…think we have to do it.” Roland sighed, grumbled internally, then nodded. “I’ll go first. Can’t afford to have our king to lose a hand.” He looked around the door. There was no keyhole. Rolling his eyes, Roland tapped the key on the door- and it rumbled. Slowly, it turned open, revealing an ominously glowing doorway.

A page, huh, Roland thought as he stuck his left hand into the light. (After all, his right one’s lost feeling.) He wiggled his fingers, and his index finger almost immediately brushed against something-something paper-like. He grabbed it and yanked his arm out. Sure enough, he was holding onto a page- an empty one. Seeing Roland was fine, Evan hastily thrust his arm into the light, and just as quickly, he ended up holding onto a similar piece of paper- just that it had words on it. The door swung shut, and when Roland struck the key on it again, it didn’t budge.

“Well?” The lady had walked up behind them again, and took the papers from them, inspecting them one by one. “Let’s see… Morn…” She smiled. “That’s one nice haul, young one. Let’s see the other… hm?” She held the empty page closer. “Now that’s interesting.”

Roland felt embarrassment sneaking up his neck. “I know, it’s completely empty, can you give us the scrubber already?”

“Oh, no, it’s quite the opposite!” She was half-dancing away from the two. “This looks empty because it’s magically encrypted! Let’s see here…” She fiddled with the page for a while, then jumped. “Oh… oh! This is- yes! The last pages!” She ran back to them. “Excuse me, I must introduce myself. I am Professor Mileniyah. You can call me Professor. I work in Boddly’s library in Goldpaw- you can say I am a historian. You both’ve been able to procure items that are very important for the record of history: specifically, one of the fallen kingdoms from long ago. Here is the
scrubber I promised.” Evan took the sparkling scrubber at long last. “Now, since you’ve been able to obtain such fine results, I can entrust you with the key. I expect you to seek out the rest of the Dreamer’s Doors- nine of them in total, and bring me a page from each. Collect them all, and there will be bonus marks in it for you two.”

She turned to leave, but Evan chased up to her. “Please, Professor: Will you let us see what we got? I’m curious about histories of these ancient kingdoms.” Mileniyah thought, then smiled. “Very well. If you come by Goldpaw, go to Boddly’s library, and I will show you. Just not now: I have to go preserve these pages. Good luck.”

As the professor left, Roland stared at the key again, sighing. “What exactly have we been roped into?” Evan shrugged, smiling, “I don’t mind- I’m pretty intrigued about these Dreamer’s Doors myself.” He held up the scrubber. “And we have Auntie Martha’s scrubber, don’t we? Let’s go bring it back to her.”

Chapter End Notes

Batu voice: I told ye not to try luggin’ a log like me, lad, are ye trying to be a lil’ rebel like last time with the noodles?

Thank you for reading chapter 23! Here’s a quick time skip and finally remembering about the travel doors haha. I have a headcanon that Martha’s very powerful despite how she looks. Under that poofy dress are spectacular biceps, trust me.

Mileniyah’s... really long-winded, honestly. Fitting for a professor. I’ve shrunk the dreamer mazes into simply loot boxes, both for convenience and lore purposes. You’ll hear more about it soon enough.
Thankfully, Auntie Martha hadn’t been troubled at all by the delay, and with the teleport spell, they had been able to teleport, people and Higgledies both, back to Evermore. Once the Minister of Higgledies settled into her new cottage, Roland met up with the rest of the cabinet and proposed to hold a meeting in the castle. Now that they had a more-or-less full cabinet, it was now time to think of the future further in.

“Well?” Niall spoke as they formed a circle in front of the throne. “Whatever ye want to talk about, judgin’ by yer look, ye’ve a bee in yer bonnet about it.”

“You can say that.” Roland crossed his arms. “I’ll get straight down to it. Evermore’s coming along nicely. We have a castle, set up all our ministries; things are starting to take shape. But we’re missing something.” “And that is?” Tani asked, prompting Roland to go on. “A banner.” His mind immediately reminded him people could mistake it as the literal kind, and he quickly continued, “We have people from all over the world; at least three places, as far as I can note. We need to have a banner, a shared purpose for them to unite under our nation. So I’ve gathered you all today to discuss this: What exactly do we stand for? What of our goals? Values? We need to know what we’re working toward to let everyone else join in on it; we can’t call ourselves a nation otherwise.” If there was only him and the people who knew his origins around, he’d bring up his nation as an example, but it was a no go today. He turned to Evan. “You’re the King: so what kind of place do you want your kingdom to be? What goals do you want to set?”

Evan thought for a while. “Well… Most of all, I suppose I’d like it to be a kingdom of happiness. A place where people can get along with one another.” Roland nodded. Good to know the king was steadfast about it. “We know; but can you make it more concrete?” “Hm…” Evan’s ears perked up. “I know! I’d like my kingdom to a kingdom without war or fighting. That’s what I want.”

“Hol’ up, Evan.” Batu raised a hand. “Who doesn’t want that, hm? Ye think we liked bein’ at it tooth an’ nail with the wyverns all the time? Or they with us? Folks’ll have their differences, no matter how lovey-dovey a nation ye’ll be able to build.” Roland thought about the union back in his world. “He has a point.”

“But I really do want that!” Evan insisted. “I want to bring an end to war! That’s our banner- it has to be!”

The king was being very steadfast about it. A good thing, Roland thought. “Well then. If that’s your decision, we’ll need to gather intel on our rival kingdoms: their population, politics, to say a few. I for one don’t feel like I know enough about this world yet.”

“I know just the right place for ye, then!” Niall proposed. “Ye’ll should go over the Goldpaw library for a read. It’s run by a mad old baggage name Boddly.” …Hey, hadn’t Roland heard the name of Boddly twice now? “They’ve got books, scrolls, tablets, what have ye on every subject under the sun! Ye’ll find yer… intel there, trust me!”

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Finding Boddly’s library was easy. People quickly pointed in its direction at the mention of ‘Boddly’, although there were a few awkward smiles. The five pushed open the doors to the library,
and Tani quickly ran in. As befitting of the title of library, it was full of books, from floor to ceiling. They all had some sort of stony sheen to it, but Roland decided not to think much of it.

“Whoo-hee!” Tani looked around the place, then leaned over the railing, which Lofty jumped onto. “Look, the building—it goes below the floor!”

“Hrmnn?” An figure shifted from one of the bookshelves. “Silence in the library, shh!”

A stout (but not short), flabby old lady, decorated luxuriously by various jewelry stomped into view. Roland couldn’t help but feel a shiver down his spine. The librarian pointed at Tani. “We’ll have no rubbernecker here!” Her gaze cast to the rest of the visitors. “You’ll need the proper accreditation before I’ll let you touch my booky-wookies, yesss? So. Do you have a library card, hmm? No card, no booky-wookies, and you’ll have to go through me to get one!” She vaguely scratched at the fur collar she wore. “Hee!”

Roland shook his head. “No, librarian Boddly. Can you give us one? We need a look at those books.” “Neeeed to, hmm?” Boddly drawled. “Desperate to get our greasy fingers on my booky-wookies, are we, hm? Only mine will do, hmmm?”

Roland resisted the urge to simultaneously push Evan behind him and get the flippin’ heck hell out of there, and nodded. Boddly’s grin widened. “Heeeeheeeheeheehee! Well, aren’t we a cheeky one! But I like a cheeky one! Heehee! Yes…”

“Please, miss Boddly!” Evan added. “You’ll be doing us a huge favour!”

“Hnnnn? What’s this? Another cheeky one?” Boddly glanced at Evan. “And this one’s… all… little and adorable… yes…”


“Very well.” Boddly scratched her fur collar again, completely ignoring him. “Boddly will ask you three teeny-weeny favoury-wavery-woos. Perhaps, if you’re lucky, I might let you touch my precious bookies after that.”

Batu spoke up. “What favors?” The rest of the group had moved to Evan’s side as well. “Run ‘em by me.”

“Eager, aren’t we?” Boddly held up three fingers. “Three little favors! Three little treats! Just for Boddly!” She did her creepy hees before continuing, “First favor! First treat! I have a ravenous hankering for a red red rose!” Another bout of creepy hees, and Roland ran his hand through his hair. He saw Evan moving forward and frowning at him out of the corner of his eye. “So reed! So preeety! Mmm, yesss! And they only bloom once in ever such a long while! Luckily for you, there are some nearby!”

“Flip, mun!” Lofty jumped. “You want us to go flower-pickin’ for you? Flip, mun! Talk about takin’ liberties! Why can’t you go yourself, you workshy old harridan!” Boddly scratched the fur again. “Nonononono! Awful creature! Ignorant creature! I must stay and tend to my bookies, yesss? So leave Goldpaw and go north. North! But you can’t walk there! No! It’s at the top of a great, big, huge cliff! Oh, yesss!”

“How do we go there, then?” Evan asked. Boddly grinned. “You’ll need to cast Bridge to get there. Do you know it? Hmm? No? Would you like a teeny-weeny hinty-winty-woo on who can help you?” As Evan nodded, Boddly’s grin widened. “Li Li! Little Li Li! She’ll know what to do! Oh, yes! Mmmm…”
Roland turned on his heel. “Sounds like a local. We’ll go find her then. Come on, Evan.”

Once out of the building, Batu tapped him on the shoulder. “Ye feelin’ alright? Ye’ve been looking tense as a string ‘nd a weight.” Roland shrugged, “Just a bit scared of heights, is all.” Tani nodded. “You didn’t look down the railings, Batu! The thing reaches down for who knows how long, and all of them are bookshelves!”

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On second thought, Roland shouldn’t have hurried to get the move on- only after a bout of asking did they know Li Li’s whereabouts, and as they approached her down the stairway, she turned to make her greetings.

“You are Evan, yes?” The dogfolk didn’t look much younger than Evan. “I have been waiting for you. I am Li Li, Boddly told me a lot about you.” “Y-yes, I am.” The young king answered. “-I heard from Miss Boddly that you know about the spell Bridge?” The young sorceress nodded. “If I help you develop it, will you be willing to hear my story?” “Yes.” Li Li looked at the ground as she begun, “Well… You see, I have become disillusioned of Goldpaw of late. The trick dice, the sham trial… I had so much respect for Master Pugnacius, but now…”

“It wasn’t his fault, Li Li. He was manipulated.” Evan tried to explain, but Li Li frowned. “I know, but… I cannot forget. Things just do not feel the same anymore.” “I see how it is.” Batu commented. “Boddly got us to see ye both for the spell and… Here’s a prop’sal. Would ye want to come to our kingdom, Evermore? Sounds like a change of scenery’ll do ye good.”

The young dogfolk nodded. “…I think it might. You exposed Master Pugnacius’ deeds, after all. You… Evermore has a good heart.” She turned to Evan. “I hope you are a leader I can follow.”

“I’ll do my best.” Evan held out his hand. “Then, I-“ “All I ask is that you defeat three skeleplasms. Then I will gladly join you.”

What a change of pace. Lofty jumped. “Oi, coy, oi! Wha’s this monster-slayin’ talk all o’ a sudden?” “I guess this is a trial, Li Li.” Evan smiled, and the girl chuckled. “And you have a fast mind, too. I cannot risk following a new leader, only to be let down. I want you to make a promise… I’d like to see a leader be able to carry out such a small promise.”

The king nodded. “We’ll be right back.”

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Three skeleplasms and two whamsters later, Li Li nodded. “I must thank you for taking the time. Now, this spell called Bridge… is no easy feat to develop and master- while I admit I have a talent for magic, I am quite new to teaching it. I will be unable to teach it to you here and now, in any case.”

“We’ve built a facility for magic in Evermore, Li Li.” Evan tried to persuade. “If you’d like, you can go to Evermore and develop the spell there; you don’t have to do it here, you see.”

“Thank you. I suppose in a well-facilitated facility, the spell will take faster- but it will still take a day, at least.” Li Li began her way along the road, but turned to bow. “I’d advise you to take a walk around town and see if there are any people in need of a new environment like me. There are quite a few people that would be happy to follow you.”

As the young sorceress left for Evermore, Lofty hummed. “Sounds like an invitation, en’t it. Let’s go scout more potential citizens.”
Chapter End Notes

Boddly just went and set off each and every one of the stranger alarms in Roland in a single conversation and he probably even didn't recognize it.

Thank you for reading Chapter 24! I've kind of supposed that Boddly's the implacable person that everyone... tolerates but all have a slight fear of.

You can probably guess which minquest I'm going to cover for next chapter.
Taking a walk around town developed within a half hour to chasing an imposter downtown for a fortune teller. Thankfully, said fortune teller was happy to both forgive the imposter and join the ranks of Evermore, saying that there were stars shining down on it. They were about to walk down to the Sweet Saffron to grab a drink when Evan’s ears perked up, and he turned to look up the side alley. “I hear arguing…” The half-Grimalkin muttered, then hurried towards the source of the voice, prompting the rest to follow. As they turned around the corner, they found a mother and her child arguing.

“But mother! If we ask the hunters to send a smaller group, they-“ “You will not!” The mother hissed. “Do you want to be jeered at again?” “But-“ The kid noticed Evan. “Oh, look, mother! It’s King Evan! We should ask King Evan to help us!” His mother only sighed. “Shh, be quiet, yapping pup! We do not need anyone’s assistance; we can cope just fine on our own!”

“But if there is anything we can do, we’d be happy to help, really!” Evan insisted, “Could you at least tell us what the problem is?” The mother began to spoke, but the kid quickly took hold of the chance. “We were going to Capstan-upon-Hull, but a monster attacked us!” “Quiet, kid-” His mother was about to pull him away, but he continued, “We tried to ask the monster hunters to help us, but it slunk off and hid! They think us liars now!” “Sounds like one o’ those monsters that prey on the weak and little t’me.” Batu mused. “Too scared to take on any’ne their size.”

The mother kneeled, grabbing her child by her shoulders, voice cracking in despair. “Quiet, I beg you! Don’t you understand what I said, Zhong Hun?! We don’t need anyone’s help! We’ll just take a ship there! No more of this talk; this will pass, the beast will move on, and all will be fine!”

Ba-bump.

“How many times did I say everything will be fine? Why did you hit them, Roland?”

*He was a kid again, standing in front of his mother, the latter sitting in a chair with hand on forehead. He was clenching his fists. “I can’t let them keep bullying me, mother. I… I have to do something!”*

“Something!” His mother yelled. “And now not only are you in detention, but everyone will avoid you! Like a living plague!” She leaned back again, heaving a sigh. “I told you. I told you every time you came back that the bullies will bore of you and all will pass. But you didn’t listen! Y-you had to take this toy sword and hit him!”

His father tried to hold her by her shoulders from her side. “But, dear, it isn’t his fault that he’s-“

“Then it’s MY fault, isn’t it-!” She snapped at him, eyes full of tears. “It’s all my fault he’s like this, it’s all my fault I brought him into this world with- with this condition, isn’t it-!” She collapsed into her seat, sobbing, unresponsive to her husband’s attempts to comfort her. “I-it’s all my fault… I’m sorry…”

Roland’s heart thundered. “I’m not going to let that happen.” He heard himself say. “We don’t give in to bullies. We can’t let them have their way, and we won’t!” The mother looked up from her kneeling position, stammering. “But-“ Roland turned to the kid. “You said the monster attacked you
on the path of Capstan-upon-Hull?” “Yes! It's a one-way down south. It probably ran away when it heard the hunters march, but your smaller numbers should draw less attention.”

“Good.” He was walking down the stairs before he’d recognised it. He could vaguely feel eyes on his back. “Come on.”

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“Give me twenty soreaways. And three Angel’s Tears—“ His fingers drummed on the item store’s counter. “—actually, make that five.” “What’s gotten into ye, Roland?” Batu asked, standing to his side. Roland turned to face Batu, crossing his arms. “That monster is going down, Batu. I’m just making sure it does.” Batu frowned, then hissed, “I don’t mean yer item-buying, I mean ye. Ye’re scaring the kids.”

Roland cast a glance at the two children, and sure enough, they were staring at him with worried expressions. He looked away, running a hand through his hair.

“Sir. Twenty soreaways and five Angel’s Tears.” The item store owner piped up, pushing forward a small package. Roland took it and gave it to Batu. He’ll explain it later, then maybe they’ll learn not to hold back against bullies.

“Let’s go. This will be quick.”

---

Finding the monster was easy enough- they’d only walked out of the nocturnal influence when three flashes of lightning barely missed them. A dragon flapped down in front of them, snarling.

“Cor, isn’t that a Windwyrm?!” Lofty yelled. “Cor, that has to be one! I can’t believe it; those two survived a flippin’ Windwyrm!”

Roland summoned his sword. “Let’s get to work.”

He couldn’t quite remember what exactly he did: he slashed, dodged the wyrm’s tackles, shot from his sidearm, uttered commands for Toby and Runcible, shouted words of caution, bit onto a soreaway leaf a few times. There wasn’t much time to collect his thoughts: the windwyrm was nimble and quick to attack. Doubtlessly the rest of the group did the same; despite the wyrm’s attacks, they outmatched it by number and persistence.

Eventually, the wyrm staggered back from a lance thrust by Tani, and screamed, flying into the air. Sparks gathered around it- lighting fizzled down, forcing the five to disperse. Roland watched as it flapped its wings, more lightning gathering on the ground. As more spots glowed with electricity around him, Roland realized the pressing feeling of déjà vu on his head.

“We’ve got you cornered now, Ro-land. Now let’s hear it! Tell us what’s wrong with you.”

His back brushed against something. In his memory, his peers walked closer, snickering. “What? Can’t speak?” One of them grabbed his shirt, raised a fist. “We’ll help you talk.” An arc of pain travelled through his body. He could hear yelling from far, far away. His memory self raised a toy sword. He raised his gun, purple aura gathering around it. “Toby, help me.” The aura- Heavy Ammo, his mind reminded him, expanded into a swirling mass. He fired. The kid from nearly fifty years ago swung his toy sword down, yelling a battle cry he heard from some cartoon.

The wyrm fell, and his legs carried him to and up the dragon. The dragon screeched, flying up and taking him with it. He had to do something. He summoned his sword, and stabbed it downwards.
Electricity danced through him, and he tried it again. He had to do something. He had to do something!

His sword drove through something thin, and the wyrm cried shrilly, losing height. Roland fell, and as he hit the ground face-first, the air in his lungs seemed to be smashed together; too large to escape him. His eyes focused on a single blade of grass beside him, everything else blurred together in a singular circle of color. A screech, and thumping sounds were all he could hear in his ears for a while. What happened? Could someone be hurt? He had to get up. He-

Roland’s view turned approximately ninety degrees, and suddenly he was looking at a necklace of bone fangs. The air hustled to be released. A voice to his right- Evan. “Gosh, what’s happening to him?!” He was now looking at Batu, who raised his other hand to shush the king. “He’s breathin’ too quickly, lad. Roland?” The sky pirate waved in Roland’s sight, voice low. “Roland. Can ye hear me?” He nodded- he couldn’t bring himself to speak. “Good. Now follow me instructions. Breathe in.” He did. “Now out. In. Out. Good. In…” Batu repeated the instructions for a long while, and slowly, eventually, the lump in Roland’s throat subsided. “I-” Roland began, but at the stares the group cast him, he suddenly felt ages too young. The ground was much easier to look at. “I’m sorry.”

The Cloud Snake stood up, and Roland hurried to follow his actions. “We’ll talk later.” Batu said, face set like a thundercloud rumbling in the distance. “Let’s get back to Goldpaw.”

Tani passed Roland a soreaway as they followed the pirate back into the nocturnal plains, and he silently bit into the leaf, stomach jumping jacks in apprehension.

Chapter End Notes

And the Roland snowball of heck from a while ago finally catches up to him. No heckin’ thanks, Boddly.

Thank you for reading Chapter 25! In any case, as yall probably expected it's sidequest frickin’ 30. Roland mentioning his mother was pretty much a basis for this one. Mix that with a headcanon specific for this AU, and well, post-partum depression, basically. I'll stamp a few warning tags up front.

Also, we've hit 40k words! I was thinking 80-90k would be the most I'll be doing but obviously it won't be. Strap yourselves right tight, we're still on this heck of a ride.
When Roland came to reflect on the event some time later, he would realise they could have simply teleported back to Goldpaw. He had a gut feeling it was intentional on Batu’s part to let him wind down—by the time Roland asked, the sky pirate simply laughed and said he’d forgotten about teleporting entirely. Roland was grateful for it.

They stopped at Sweet Saffron, and Batu turned to the two kids. “Ye go on ‘nd tell the m’am ‘n kid their problem’s been dealt with.” Evan and Tani shared a glance, but quickly went on their way, followed by Lofty. The Cloud Snake sat down at the restaurant’s counter—quite empty, probably since it was past lunch time—and tapped on the empty seat next to him. “Sit.”

Roland had a feeling that this would be a long lecture, but sat down. “Two peach punches.” Batu ordered, and Roland smiled hastily, “Thanks, but no thanks. I know I shouldn’t have lost control of myself like that.”

Too late, as a glass of peach milk was placed in front of him. After paying the staff, Batu leaned on the table and took a swig out of his. “The thing is, ye’ve always been not in control. Evan’s told me all ‘bout it.” Roland froze—what did Evan tell the pirate?—and Batu harrumphed. “Ye nerves been running ye in circles after our fight with Longfang. Ye keep tryin’ to keep yerself occupied, takin’ up a a part in every work like ye were during construction. But today’s different. Ye had that right steely glare since we met Boddly, and when ye met that lady and her son? Cor! Gone, ye were.”

“I’ll try not to do that again.”

“That’s not good enough.” Batu waved his hand. “Ye keep saying ye’ll control yerself, but ye need yer nerves to do that. And from what I’m seein’, yer nerves’ doing ye nothin’ but ass.”

The pirate set down his glass. “So. Tell me. What led ye?”

Roland found his drink interesting. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got all the time in the world, lad.” Batu began to growl, but sighed and emptied his glass. The pirate looked a bit tired when he set the glass down. “Ye know what, just… Just tell me today’s. Why today did ye in spectacular. I want to know.”

Maybe he could. “…It was what the mother said. That the beast would move on and all would be fine.” Roland turned the glass on the table, feeling heat seep up his neck. “I, well, was bullied as a kid. I probably was around Evan’s age— Barely above his tens, he thought. “I was particularly frail then, so I was an easy picking.”

“Tell me more ’bout it.”

Did Batu mean why he was frail? Ah well. “Had a heart defect- a hole in my heart when I was born.”

“Cor.” He heard the pirate say, and turned to see the pirate, who quickly coughed. “I’m surprised, is all. We have this story—” Another cough. “Well, go on. I’ll tell ye when ye’re done telling yers.”

“The doctors were able to fix it, but I had a hard time recovering from the operations. Which was
why I became a fine target.” Roland wiped a bead of water off his glass. “Obviously, I couldn’t fight them off. I had to take whatever they did to me.” He heard Batu grumbling lowly. “I was coming home from school crying every day, and… my mom got worried.” It’s all my fault. “That was the worst part- I didn’t mind the bullying, but I hated seeing her like that…”

Roland took a sip from his glass and set it down. The sweet taste soothed him. “So I took up my first sword. It was a toy one, but I didn’t care- I wanted to do something to stand up for myself.” He remembered the exasperated expression his teacher gave him and chuckled. “It got me into big trouble, but I knew from then on that I couldn’t give in to bullies. Put up with them and you keep suffering.” He closed his eyes. “So, what the lady said… it got to me pretty bad. And here I was thinking I could teach Evan a lesson or two.” Like when he told his story to his son. “I ended up making a joke of myself.”

Roland could feel his head pressed down. The man younger(in appearance) jolted, and saw Batu ruffling his hair for some reason. “Ye three can come out!” The pirate called, and the two kids with Lofty sheepishly sneaked out of the alley just around Sweet Saffron. Roland couldn’t help but smirk a bit. “I had a feeling you’d do something like this, Batu.”

Evan’s ears flattened as he half-bowed at Roland. “I-I’m sorry for eavesdropping!” “It’s quite fine, Evan. I’m glad you were there, actually- speaking of it a second time would be… embarrassing.”

“And you forgot about the story, pops!” Tani pointed at her father, who blinked and scratched his head, chortling. “Oh, well. Here’s why Batu was all shocked: we have this folk story that when people’s previous lives’ gone through tough stuff, their hearts go awry.” She crossed her arms. “I didn’t expect you to be the type to be bullied from how you are now, though.”

Roland laughed and sipped his beverage. “You should see what I looked like when I was young- I had to train a lot more than the others. Anyway… I’m sorry about how I acted earlier.”

Evan shook his head. “I’m happy you were able to be honest with Batu. With us. I’m more sure now that I made the right choice to make you Chief Consul, Roland.” “I’m honored to hear it, Your Majesty.” Had Evan caught onto something? Roland dismissed the thought. He took a deep breath, finished the drink, and stood up. “We should go and tell the two folks the good news.”

“Ye want to stay on the sidelines?” Batu asked. “There’s no need to. I feel better now- I can handle it. Thanks.” Roland answered, feeling appreciation for the pirate. Curiosity, actually.

As Evan and Tani ran up ahead, he tapped the Cloud Snake’s shoulder. “Hrm?” Batu asked gruffly. “You seem to have experience dealing with situations like these.” Roland stated. His mood was more or less back to normal now- the jittery sensations were gone- but he was still feeling the remaining vestiges of self-consciousness. “Is it… okay if I ask why?”

“Oh.” Batu crossed his arms. “We sky pirates formed from people bein’ forced to be runnin’ away from crumbling nations and places.” Roland remembered Tani speaking of a similar background. “Once was, still is. Ye’d expect newcomers to have a hard time.” The leader of the sky pirates ran a finger through his moustache, then grinned. “As the head o’ the place, it falls to me to teach ‘em the ropes ‘round these parts.” His smile grew nostalgic. "Got to pay for all the times the scurvy dogs taught ol’ Batu a new one, after all.”

Roland thought of his years of sitting solitary in an office, holding meetings and writing documents, and felt a twinge of envy for the Cloud Snake. Batu probably noticed something in his expression, and brought his hand on Roland’s head, ruffling it again. “We better catch up to the others before they start worryin’ their heads off.” “Aye, aye, sir.”
“Y-you defeated the monster?!” The mother exclaimed, covering her mouth. “Oh, by the stars, none of you aren’t hurt, are you?”

“No, don’t worry.” Evan answered. “The path to Capstan-upon-Hull should be safe now. You don’t have to take the long route anymore.”

“Oh…” She closed her eyes. “I… Thank you. There’s no way I can repay you for what you’ve done for us. Zhong Hun?” The younger dogfolk straightened up. “Yes, mother?” “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that. I… I was scared. Please, can you thank them?”

“Aye.” Zhong Hun stepped in front of the group, and bowed deeply. “Thank you! Thank you for helping us! And-“ The young dogfolk turned to Roland. “You were really cool, talking about standing up to bullies! I want to be like you! How do I do it?”

Roland blinked. Someone… wanted to be like him? He looked at the kid’s eager expression, and something in his gut unraveled. “Well… As I said, you can’t give in to bullies; once you believe in yourself that you have the strength, and you will. And…” He felt the corners of his mouth curling up. “Know that even if you are in a tough spot, your family will always be there for you. Despite everything.” You’re all grown up now. “Please, take good care of your family.” Know that I’ve always been so, so proud of you, Roland, my dear son.

Zhong Hun nodded. “Aye, sir!” He ran back to his mother, taking her hand. “Let’s go home, mother.” Thanking the group once more, they went up the stairs.

For a brief moment, Roland could see himself and his mother on those stairs. His mother had graying hair. He was older- sometime in his thirties, supporting her arm as they made their way up. She spoke, and they shared a laugh.

Perhaps it was a philosophy better suited to other situations, but saying that everything will pass and all will be well was correct just the same. (And while he would never bring it up- not here, not now, not when everyone’d already spent so much time on him- he still sorely missed her. His family.)

Roland turned to the group. “I guess we’re done here. Why don’t we keep looking and see if anyone needs help?”

Chapter End Notes

Being a sixty-smth-year-old man in spirit has its perks: You already know that things changed for the better. Still needs a good mood to remember it, but still.

Thank you for reading chapter 26! Roland’s condition is akin to irl ventricular septal defect; his mother had it too. He had to take a second surgery to replace the patch from the first one because it became loose instead of letting muscle grow over it, which was why Roland said ‘operations’ and a major cause of his mother’s PPD in his childhood.

Batu being a dad is always a+.
The team were able to finish two more requests by Goldpaw citizens—mostly hunting monsters that have been terrorizing the territories near Goldpaw, and had gained the assistance of an novice armorer and a martial artist as thanks. Evan later remembered that Niall had told him about those monsters: tainted monsters, known to be corrupted by the same aura that would be associated with the Horned One, gaining immense power in place of its more aggressive instincts.

As they were preparing to walk around town a third time, a dogfolk waved to get Evan’s attention. “You’re King Evan of Evermore, yes? Li Li’s posted in the Leafbook, requesting that you go back to Evermore.” The young king brought out his tablet, and sure enough, the young sorceress’s notice had taken the spot of latest post.

‘Paging Evan: The Bridge spell has been successfully developed. The fortune teller has been helpful, but I wish the old hag would speak less of the stars. Please return to Evermore at your nearest opportunity.’ The first comment below it was from the fortune teller, Hau Ling, herself: ‘Before I reprimand you of your rudeness towards the stars, I must clarify: I am not old! I am only three years older than you! Respect your elders!’ The rest of the comments were back-and-forth banter between the two spell managers, with one slipped in by Niall saying that they should yell at each other face to face instead of doing so on the platform.

Roland brought his hand to his chin, amused. “They’re sure getting along well.” Evan nodded in acknowledgement. “We should return to Evermore; we shouldn’t keep them waiting for too long.”

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“So you mean we can’t just cast bridges all over the place?” Tani asked, a bit disappointed. Hau Ling nodded. “By Bridge, they merely meant that it would recover portions of landscapes that had been lost to magical influence.” Li Li crossed her arms, “It’s only been first developed a few decades ago- we theorize that it doesn’t work by physically making a bridge. It’s more of creating a bridge between the physical and magical realms to drag back pieces to where they should be.”

“Then what should we look out for when looking for these magically disappeared places, other than seeing an abrupt breakoff for a path?” Roland asked. Hau Ling hummed, “Well, that’s a start. You probably can see unnaturally sharp edges for places, for example. The sta-” “Oh, that’s quite enough of you.” Li Li uttered. “Boddly told me to tell you to go north-west of Goldpaw. It’s the path that should’ve lead to in front of a mountain.”

Hau Ling turned to the young sorceress, indignant. “You should trust a fortune teller’s profession!” Li Li crossed her arms, frowning, “Sorry, Miss Hau, just carrying out Boddly’s orders. I’ll let you tell whatever fortunes whenever after this- just not now.”

“Hold on.” Roland stated. “Boddly set this up?”

Li Li shrugged. “You still haven’t realised? Boddly’s putting you through trials. She’ll never let someone get a library card- not even over her corpse- unless they’re of some kind of worth to her.” She turned to Evan. “You should have Hau Ling help you thank the stars, honestly.” “Hey!” “I’m being serious.”
After letting Hau Ling pray a while, the two magic managers helped Evan empower his spells and taught Tani an electricity-based one, and sent them on their way.

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As both Hau Ling and Li Li had stated, they did find the unnaturally sharp cliff north-west of Goldpaw, and as Evan, the one with the most experience with magic among the five, focused the spell onto the gap between them and the mountain, a slab of rock appeared in a flash, connecting the two places..

“Blimey,” Tani breathed. “So that’s what they meant!”

As the five made their way across the rocky bridge, Roland felt an idea creep into his mind. Bridge brings back things lost to the magical realm… And Kingmaker energies… Should they be called magic? He brought up his gloved hands, and placed his left hand over his right. They should, right?

What if… he tried Bridge on himself?

He turned aside, pretending to look down the cliff and concentrated. The others have gone on ahead, so they wouldn’t see. His right hand was what was missing from the physical world, and he imagined himself reaching out and dragging it back.

White-hot pain lashed through his hand, and barely suppressing a cry, he stumbled back and fell on his backside. “Roland?!” He looked up to see the group readying to run to him. “I’m fine! Forgot how high the place is.” He faked an embarrassed smile and straightened up. “Knew it was a bad idea to look over the edge.”

Tani sighed as he hurried to catch up with the four. “I get you. With the thing appearing like it did, I'm pretty tempted to see if it was solid too.” The group laughed briefly, and turned their gaze onto the hedge in front of them- and there it was, among the shrubbery, the red, red roses. Evan picked one up gingerly, admiring the color. “Look at the leaves… Even they’re crimson!” He carefully let it be absorbed into the arms band, then nodded. “We can finally report back to Boddly now!” Lofty grunted in agreement. “Aye, and we better do it before she throws a proper strop, yeah?”

As they began to leave, Roland felt the pain in his right hand finally fizzle away into nothingness. He pinched the edge of his sleeve with it. Nothing. He sighed and followed the rest back down the cliff. Shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up.

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“Yessss! This is it, this is it!” Boddly cackled, holding the red red rose in her ring-studded hands. “Wonderful! Mmm! Magical! Mmm! Beautiful! So red! Sooo…”

Roland took a deep breath as Boddly went on about the rose. The wriggling discomfort in his gut was back again, but he had to deal with it. Batu said it affected him- never again. She was putting these trials out, right? Imagine it was a trial. Of patience, acceptance- whatever helped him sleep at night.

“Oh, Evan dear! You are a lovely boy! A special boy! Boddly hasn’t been so happy in, oh…. Centuries!” An embarrassed laugh from Evan. “Now it’s time for you to do me my second little favory-wavory-woo! It will be dangerous! Very dangerous! Ooh!” She scratched her fur collar. “Have you heard of incineraptors? Fiery-wiery, horrible hot dragons!”

“Yesss! You know where to find them!” Boddly grinned. “I want an incineraptor’s horn! Yesss! Its horny-worny-woo! And you know how to get it, don’t you? Hit it! Hurt it! Beat it black and blue! Heeheehee!”

“Arr, are ye kidding me?!” Batu yelled. “We knows where to find them, well enough- and we knows to steer well clear! The fiends’ll burn ye to a crisp as soon as look at ye!” Boddly snorted. “Noisy man! Nasty man! Stupid-“

“Don’t talk about Batu like that.” Welp, there goes the trial of whatever.

Boddly ran her fingers through her collar, grunting. “Hmm. Use a watery spell, yesss? Kills them just like that, yesss?” The group’s gaze fell on Evan, and the young king blinked. “Of course! Fire is weak to water… And… I’m the only one to know a water spell.”

“Don’t care what you do! But bring it, yes? Bring me a horny-worny-worny-woo!”

They were about to leave when Boddly coughed. “Oh, present for you.” She held a strange bottle, and Evan took it, reading, “Secret… Supplement? What’s in it, Miss Boddly?” “Don’t know what’s in it. You’ll need it. Boddly can tell. You’ll know when you need it, dear! Mmm…”

The five shared confused glances before leaving the library.

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“All-natural, all-wonderful, all-powerful serum for silk-smooth skin and instant nourishing nutritional niceness as though time had turned on itself…?” Roland read the ingredients label and looked up, raising an eyebrow. “That’s no ingredient label at all.” “But what do we do about it?” Evan wondered. “It’s a trial Boddly gave us- this has to be critical at some point.”

“Obviously, we can’t use it on ourselves- It’s probably really dangerous stuff. But it’s liquid-based, right?” Tani mused. “So what if-“ “We’re not using it on the raptor, girlie.” Batu commented. “Might contain water, but we have enough hell fighting it as it is without silk skin and nutrition.” “Oof. Makes sense.”

Roland shivered at the mental image of a dragon posing and glittering in the sun. “Well, in any case, if the incineraptor’s dangerous, we might want stock up on soreaways, angel tears, the like. We don’t have much left over from last time.”

Having come to an agreement, they set off for the item store.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 27! Li Li and Hau Ling actually finished developing the spell pretty early, they just ended up discussing how to explain it for really long. Hau Ling insisted on consulting the stars, and while it did help them get a hint, it also lead to Li Li’s little comment on the post.

I think I’ve only seen Bridge being used once as of Chapter 5, though. I’m sure it’ll get another use late-game, but… eh.

EDIT: Now that I’ve run through my current Citizen Almanac, Hau Ling’s a lady, actually, so I went and fixed it!
As it turned out, had Roland and Evan strayed off the path and jumped on the prop-leaved clover near where they had entered the canyon, they would have faced an early, fiery demise— that clover lead right into the incineraptor’s domain. “A literal case of curiosity killing the cat…” Roland mused, trying not to look mortified.

According to Batu, Incineraptors were known for two things: territorial instincts and a taste for carrion eggs. “They’re either angry that ye’d entered their place, or they’re angry ye’d gotten near where the squawkers build their nests. Which is…” He pointed up the cliff. “Up there. From how the darned lizard hasn’t burnt us to pieces, it’s munchin’ some eggs, likely.”

“So… how do we get up there?” Roland asked, and the sky pirate scratched his head. “Arr, time was I would’ve shimmied up there as quick as yer can tie yer shoes. But that was a while back– and ye might not want to tire yerselves out before we even get to the ugly mug.” “A birdmobile, then?” “Be my guest, Roland, lad.” The Cloud Snake shrugged. “But ye’ll think better of it when ye’re tumbling out of the skies, wings ablaze round ye.”

“Oh! Everyone, over here!” Evan had walked in front of the cliff when the two men had been talking. He stooped, pointing at something. “Prop-leaved clover!”

The six gathered around the spot Evan was pointing at- and sure enough, a clover. Except… “Yeah. Dead prop-leaved clover.” Tani said. “Don’t think the growth spell’d do any good for it, either.” “If only we could make it young and fresh again…” Evan’s ears perked up in realization. “…As though time had turned on itself!”

Nimbly, the young king brought out the bottle of supplement from his arms ring and uncorked it, pouring the contents onto the plant. The plant began to glow pink- the shrivelled leaves rising and becoming turgid again. When the light dissipated, the once-dead clover spun gently in the breeze “That… that’s not how a beauty product works. It doesn’t make sense.” Roland muttered, blinking in disbelief. “It’s Boddy we’re talking about, mun.” Lofty replied. “Not much ‘bout her makes sense.” “D-don’t say it like that.” Evan chuckled without humor.

A few more prop-leafed clovers later, a fireball sizzled and burst onto the rocky walls.

“Remember to only use Watersphere when the dragon’s not targeting you, Evan!” Roland yelled, running to the side. “Everyone, spread out!” “And don’t risk fighting the ‘rap close up!” Batu added. “We bought plenty of sixth sensers just for this!”

They would’ve hoped that the dragon was stupid enough to make the fight akin to a game of monkey-catch-ball, but it was never that easy. Soon, it had figured out that Evan was the centerpoint of its enemies, and had fully turned its attention on the young boy, chasing him around and ignoring the arrows and bullets- even the occasional skills from the rest of the group. Such was the intelligence of monsters that knew who to terrorize. Evan had continually commanded the Higgledies to help as he ran past them, but the fire-wreathed dragon swept them aside with its long, flaming tail, scattering the spirits.

They needed a change of plans- fast.
“Arr- I’ll deal with it!” Batu snarled, taking out his axe and running towards the dragon. “Wait, pops!” Tani yelled, docking an arrow on her bow, but the Cloud Snake had spun his axe at the dragon, the metal weapon cutting into lava-like flesh. The dragon snarled, and Batu quickly pulled his axe away, the edge glowing red while Tani fired off arrows to cover for him. “You alright, Batu?” Roland called out, and the pirate nodded, waving his hand in the air to cool it down. “Don’t you try it, lad! The dragon’s lava!” A claw covered by fire slammed down on the spot where Batu would’ve been had he not jumped aside.

‘The dragon’s lava’. That could mean its entirety was a singular weak point to water. Water… melee…

“Evan!” The half-Grimalkin figuratively screeched to a halt, catching his breath. “Yes!” “Do you remember what you did with Longfang?” “Oh… oh! Yes, I do!” The king might not have the stamina though… “Cast Watersphere towards the tail! I’ll try it!”

A bubble of water flew from Evan’s staff, and Roland ran to catch up with it, driving his sword through. Just as he hoped, the water clung to his sword, and yelling, he swung it down on the dragon’s tail.

For a moment, he couldn’t see much because of all the steam- which scalded- but the raptor’s scream and flailing told him that it was working. He pushed the sword down as much as he could, hearing strange clinking sounds, and when he could feel heat in his left hand, he pulled away, running before the dragon turned to breathe fire at him. As the steam dissipated, it revealed a long, flaming tail… but with a large indent in it that didn’t glow with fire.

So the dragon was lava, literally. “Evan! Get the others to try the same!” He yelled, rolling to avoid a tackle from the incineraptor. “And aim for the tail!” “Aye sir!”

Now he just needed to focus on avoiding the dragon’s attacks. Roland jumped back and bit into a soreaway as another bout of fire spread in front of him. Toby squeaked from his left, as though warning him- and he uttered a word of thanks to his trusty Higgledie when he stepped back again to avoid a claw through the flames.

A scream from the dragon, and it turned around. Roland braced himself to be swept by the tail- only that there were none. He ran to the side, and saw the severed tail on the ground, Batu roaring in victory next to it while running to avoid the flames. There we go, Roland thought.

The dragon, seeing how its opponents suddenly all knew how to use water attacks was appropriately disoriented, turning around and trying to attack each of them frantically. Without the wits to help the incinerator pin down a target any longer, it only helped itself gain more wounds, and upon one last swing from Batu’s axe, it finally fell, all but its horns cooling into stone.

Batu chopped off one of the horns, and Evan sat down, huffing. “I-I’ve never ran so much in my life!” The young king grinned, wiping sweat off his hair. “But we have the horn now!”

Tani walked over, squatting and smiling at the young king. “Good job, Evan! We’d have a lot more trouble fighting the lizard if you weren’t there.” “Please, don’t. I didn’t contribute a lot in terms of actually bringing the monster down.” “Hey, Tani.” Roland brought his hand to his chin. “How did your father- Batu know the dragon was-“

“Oi.” Batu had stepped next to them, holding out a horn. “Evan, here.” Roland could see that he held a second one in his other as the young king held the warmly glowing horn. “It’s beautiful…” Evan whispered, and Tani nodded, albeit with a slightly solemn expression. Was she thinking about how they had to bring down a literal dragon for it?
“D’ye mind if we take a detour to see how the ol’ sky pirates are doin’?” Batu said. A feeling in Roland’s gut told him something was up. Something that could only give him the description of ‘familiar’. “Might as well take the chance while we have it.”

“Of course, Batu!” Evan smiled immediately. “I’ve been wondering how the sky pirates are doing, too.” “Mm. Thanks.” Batu stored the horn in his arms band. “Let’s go, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 28! And the attack from... 8? 9? chapters ago makes a reappearance.

I’d say this chapter was vaguely influenced by Monster Hunter because of the tail-chopping and the need to know where to stand, haha.

As a side note, do you viewers think I should try cross-posting it on ff.net? Or is this platform already enough? I really haven’t touched fanfiction sites in quite long so I'd like to ask you for advice. Thanks!
“Arr, it’s the boss ‘imself!” “He’s back!” “’nd King Evan too!” “W-what happened?”

The sky pirates gathered around the team, apprehensive. “Peace, lads.” Batu stated, “Evermore is not gone. We’ve decided to drop by from a mission to slay the Incineraptor.”

Hushed whispers all around the crowd, and Roland could sense some sort of worry- was he over-analysing?- among them. Batu huffed. “Me says peace, lads.” The pirate brought out the incineraptor’s horn, and triumphantly raised it high. “The darned lizard is slain! Tonight, we feast!”

After a moment of awed silence, the sky pirates burst into cheers. Once they had ran off to prepare, Evan poked on Batu’s arm.

“What about the sky pirates that had already joined Evermore?” A pause, and Batu chortled. “Always have yer priorities right, lad. Don’t ye worry.”

During the preparations, a sky pirate had tried to strike a conversation with Evan, only to run away, making the young king have to chase him down (and the rest of the crew chase Evan) multiple times. Once cornered, it turned out the pirate had wanted to move to Evermore, only for his nervousness to get in his way, and after a few quips, one more citizen would join the nation. Soon, Khumbish and Chingis, leading their crew of Evermore pirates, arrived in the den, and after small talk between them and their boss, the feast began.

The feast was enthusiastic, but there was just a feeling of austerity hanging over everyone that Roland couldn’t shake off. Even when the dinner ended and everyone settled down to sleep, the atmosphere of the place kept Roland awake. He turned in his bed in the inn- the sky pirate duo had taken up residence in their own cabin. It had something to do with the Incineraptor, definitely- but what exactly?

Suddenly he heard walking outside, as well as the light of fire. He slipped out of bed, taking care to put on his gloves and coat, then tiptoed out of the inn- only to see a sky pirate walk by, holding a torch. They were gathering in the clearing below, where the birdmobiles are- and Roland followed, trailing behind the queue.

“Hey, ye don’t have a torch, do ye?” A pirate behind Roland spoke up, and quickly a burning torch was shoved into his hand. “Uh, thanks.” “Move, then.”

As he followed the line of pirates, Roland saw Batu and Tani, the former holding the incineraptor’s horn and the latter holding two torches. The Cloud Snake placed the horn on a small pile of wood, and when his daughter passed him a torch, he nodded and placed the torch onto the horn. A sizzling sound, and the wood engulfed in flames, embers floating up. The two stepped back, and one by one, the pirates placed their own torches into the growing flames before returning to where they had come in silence, sparks of red floating up and around the sky pirates’ den.

This was a procession, Roland realised too late.

He could notice that Batu raised his eyebrows when he placed the torch given to him into the fire, and once he had, he pretended to walk up the stairs- then jumped off, peering around the stone pillar. He saw Evan- when had the king woken up?- lower the torch into the blaze, and walk towards the
“R-roland?” The king saw him, and when he jumped down, whispering, Roland quickly raised his finger to his lips, waiting for the last pirates walk up the stairs.

The clearing was quiet except for the crackling of fire.

“It’s rude to participate in rituals that ye don’t know about, ye know.”

Roland stepped out from the shadows, Evan following close behind. “I’m really sorry, Batu. They gave me a torch, and, uh-”

“Arr, alright. At least ye learned how to do it proper in the little time they gave ye.” Batu squatted in front of the fire. “Come ‘ere.”

The four gathered around the fire- it was already dwindling, but in the fire, it was hard to see the others’ expression. The embers continued to float in the sky.

“Wha…” Evan began, but quickly silenced himself. Tani and Batu looked at each other, nodded. The Cloud Snake coughed. “Ye seen it. We sky pirates have a custom that when one o’ us falls to monsters ‘nd such, on the occasion that we’re able to slay the same beast that did it, we take a trophy and burn it. To tell ‘em that their death’s been avenged and… that we move on. They don’t have to worry o’er us anymore.”

Tani rested a hand on Batu’s shoulder as he continued. “Well enough. She was m’wife- name’s Noma. Fell to the blasted Incineraptor a year ago when it decided to show its ugly mug around the sky pirates’ den.” Tani’s shoulders drooped as Batu continued. “A true warrior, she was, charging at the wyrm, lance drawn. Managed to chase it off to a distant corner of the canyon, but… Noma fell to burns ‘nd wounds we weren’t able to fix.” A smile from the Cloud Snake. “Truly went in a blaze of glory beffittin’ of ‘er.”

“I’m…” Evan bowed. “I’m truly sorry for your loss, Batu.”

Batu looked up to the sky for a few moments- even the embers were blinking out gradually. “I’m glad ye participated- Noma’ll be right glad to know ‘bout ye.” He stood up. “But didn’t ye hear? We burn the trophy, we move on. There’s nothin’ that holds ol’ Batu back now.” He raised his hand to ruffle Tani’s hair beside him, initiating a muffled word of surprise from the pirate girl. “We’ll set off to give Boddly the horn first thing tomorrow- go get some sleep.”

Evan nodded. “We will. Good night, Batu, good night, Tani.”

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“Hey, Roland?”

They had settled back in their beds again, and Roland turned around to see a wide-awake Evan on the opposite side of the room. “As Chief Consul, I advise you better start sleeping. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day again.”

Evan curled up on his bed. “I-I know… but I feel worried.” “About what? Batu told you-” “It’s, uh… I know he told me basically not to worry, but… It’s about Boddly’s trials. There’s a…” A pause. “It’s really hard to explain, sorry.” “You can tell me tomorrow, you know. We’ll have more time then.” “Alright.” Evan turned over. “Good night, Roland.” “Don’t let the bed bugs bite, Evan.”

As the night grew quieter, Roland stared at the ceiling. Now that Evan had mentioned the trials…
Roland mused to himself. In each of the two trials, something personal had happened. In Batu and Tani’s cases, it was directly related to the trial. So the third trial… might target Evan- would target Evan somehow.

Sleep had completely left him now. What would be Evan’s concerns? Evermore, obviously- would something happen to it? No, wait. The two trials had been fetch quests- it wasn’t possible that Boddly would ask them to give her Evermore. Unless it was? He really wished that he could just sit up, grab a book and start listing all the possibilities he could think of. He mentally marked down Evermore as ‘less likely’, and tried to think of better guesses. After all, there was this prying feeling in his mind- he’d forgotten about something obvious,

The rest of the night gave him nothing but obscure guesses and a headache(and sore limbs, but that was expected from the fight the day before), and when the group gathered with the Evermore pirates at the entrance, Lofty was quick to make a remark about it.

“Funny how you told Evan to go sleep and didn’t sleep yourself.” The Kingmaker smirked. “I thought you were snoozing on the tables, Lofty.” Roland groaned, rubbing his eyes. “A Kingmaker needs no sleep. A Chief Consul does.”

“What’d I hear about not sleeping?” Batu had stepped next to the two, crossing his arms. “Nothing, Batu.” “Nothing, ye say- I’ve seen that face plenty of times when we were buildin’ Evermore.” Roland closed his eyes- partially to suppress a yawn. “I’ll grab a tea when we get to Goldpaw. That good enough for you?” Batu grunted and turned back to the sky pirates.

“Alright, ye scurvy dogs. We’ll be gettin’ back to Evermore. Ye make sure the den works fine, yes? No wyvern raids and the such.” “Aye aye, sir!” One of the sky pirates that would stay at the settlement stepped forward. “Best luck to ye, boss!”

Batu nodded, and as the teleporting spell took effect, their surroundings glowed a gentle blue-white, wiping the settlement away from sight.

Chapter End Notes

We're seeing a trend here, aye?

Thank you for reading Chapter 29! I'll explain the trials in full when we get by the third one, but feel free to toss in your own cents of thoughts.

The ceremony was inspired by boat burials, although there isn't a boat. They're still pirates, right?
Roland made use the brief stay in Evermore to do a quick overview of the nation. Nothing out of the ordinary, thankfully- other than Niall’s ongoing requests for a casino, which was quickly answered by a single no from the Chief Consul. The elder Greenling’s been putting in work alright(contrary to… how much he liked gambling), but that didn’t give him the permission to just do whatever in Evermore.

“What’s the rush, anyway?” Niall asked. “We’re supposed to give a report at the end of the month- it’s barely the first few days of this one.” “It’s nothing, just checking in.” “Sure, young’un.”

Once he had made sure everything was still running smoothly, the group teleported to Goldpaw, and when they reached the library, Evan handed Boddly the incineraptor’s horn.

“Oh, yes, yes, yesss!” Boddly held the horn like some kind of baby. Roland didn’t really feel like caring. “So warm! So wonderful and warm! Warms up my heart like a hotty-hot-hot thing! Boddly knew she was right to ask her favory-wavory-woos of you! And it’s time for the third and final one! Heehee! Do me this one last niceness and you’ll have a lovely-wovely library card of your very own! Yesss!”

Lofty jumped up in elation. “Righto! Let’s get to it! What’d you need, Boddles, ol’ girl?” Boddly hummed. “Need someone with an army! Horrible bandits stole my stone! My lovely, lovely stone!”

Oh, thank the higher-ups it was just a fetch quest- wait.

“Kings have armiessss, yesss?” Boddly continued addressing Evan. “And you’re a king! An adorable, teeny-tiny king, but a king nonetheless! Mm! Use your army! Get it back! My stoney-woney-woo!”

“I…” Evan brought his hand to his chin, thinking. “I’m not sure I’d call the forces of Evermore an army quite yet… We just have two troops.” “Nah, mun.” Lofty affirmed. “Two troops’s more like a… er, scrum?”

“Oh, oh, that won’t do!” Boddly looked shocked. “Too weak! Too weak! You’ll be squished! Slaughtered! Yesss!” She thought for a moment. “Remembered. There’s a dog man! Good doggie! Gao Jia!! Used to be a good doggie soldier! Yesss! Make him your good doggie soldier! Woof! Make your army strong! Woof!”

“Used to be…” Roland hummed. “That means… he’s unemployed?”

“Seems like it.” Tani answered. “And there’s nothing much to do here in Goldpaw but gambling. Should be a fast search.”

---

As Tani had put it, they found the former soldier sitting in a corner of the state-owned casino. Evan stepped forward, trying to greet him. “Uh…”

No response.
“Are you Mister Gao Jia? Miss Boddly told us about you-“ “Leave me alone.”

Nice reception.

“Hey, are ye listenin’?!” Batu was ready to drag the dogfolk to his feet when they heard growling. Were they about to be kicked out of the casino a second time? “Wait.” Lofty raised his hand. “Was that his… belly?”

They stood and listened- probably breaking a few Goldpaw etiquettes that Roland hadn’t been aware of- and sure enough, the growling came from below Gao Jia’s throat. And it was loud too. “He’s starvin’, by the sound of it…” Lofty whispered. Evan stepped to the side of the dogfolk. “Uhm… would you like us to help you get food?”

A moment of silence, then a cough. “I am not hungry! I-“ A drawn-out rumbling of the stomach echoed throughout the casino, drawing a few eyes from the nearby tables. “Oh, I cannot pretend any longer! Yes, I am hungry. Absolutely famished!” Evan smiled at the embarrassed dogfolk. “Then if we help bring you food, you will listen to us?”

Nice thinking.

---

Evan had to take a quick trip to and from Evermore to get Floyd the cook to make a spectacular display of a pun: an om-nom-nomelette, and the dogfolk scarfed it down outside the casino(‘Excuse me, guests, but no eating in the casino.’). Once he had, Gao Jia drummed on his armor.

“It has been years since I’ve had anything this delicious… You say this culinary genius resides in your nation? Compliments to the chef.” Gao Jia barked out a laugh. “I’ve heard that your kingdom requires army forces to beat bandits. Alas, I’ve lost the use of my good arm and most of my life purpose, so I cannot provide direct support. But the omelette… since it teaches me the joy of living…” The former soldier bowed. “I will gladly share what wisdom remains to me if it helps your kingdom. Now…”

The dogfolk army advisor crossed his arms. “What forces do you have at your disposal?”
“What swordsmen and archers, ready to deploy.” Batu answered. Gao Jia turned back to Evan. “Here’s your first lesson in tactics. An army is most effective with at least four distinct parties to maneuver. If your troops are too used to a single tactic, you may find it necessary to scout for people willing to fight- either for cause or money. The former is preferred, of course.” It made sense, Roland thought. Just one thing: “And where do we find those people?”

Gao Jia laughed. “Ha! You forget this is Goldpaw: the nation of warriors? There are plenty in this kingdom who have the courage and talent you require. Seek Bai Gon and Min Ti- they know of me, and will be sure to join you with their number of soldiers once you mention my name.”

“Thank you, Mister Gao Jia!” Evan held out a hand, and Gao Jia shook hands with the young king. “You’re welcome.” He began to leave. “As long as you have more culinary delicacies in your nation, I will help you.”

Once the dogfolk disappeared around the corner, Roland felt the urge to point out the humor. “There’s a third type of people willing to fight he’d forgot to mention. People who fight for culinary delicacies.”

The other four stared at him as if he was drunk. “Didn’t ye say ye’d grab a tea on yer way up?” Batu asked. “Eating or drinking in libraries or casinos is not allowed, Batu.” “Arr… Fine.”
Recruiting the two warriors Gao Jia had specified was easy- one asked for a sleep-be-gone, as in an alarm clock, and the other asked for the defeat of three grimchilla bangers. Both not a problem at all; in time they promised to gather their fellow fighters and meet in Evermore. Reporting of the matter to Boddly let the gang know that the bandits had scurried off to Sunrise Shore, south-east of Goldpaw.

“And that’s all, folks.” Roland said. “Do you think we should go back and make plans early?” Evan began to speak, but Batu held up his hand. “Yer tea, lad. Can’t have ye noddin’ off during the meetings” Ah.

Thankfully, they were near the restaurant already, so he walked to the counter. “Do you sell any of the tea leaves in packets?” “Why, yes, we do!” “How strong are they?” The staff seemed amused by the question. “We use a packet per kettle- and one is strong enough to make the average dogfolk not sleep for… well, a night.” “Give me two, then,” “Sure!”

He paid the staff and shook the two palm-sized packets- should be enough. A coffee back in his world would probably already have twice the caffeine compared to these. He stored them into his arms band, and turned to Batu, smiling.

“These’ll be enough to keep me up.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 30! This bit's a bit of a pacing/breather chapter to settle things down for our skirmish; if not for the 1 chapter a day rule I've set here I'd post chapter 31 immediately after this, haha.

Remember to get enough sleep, folks- it makes people irritable and makes things worse.

And here's an announcement, as of 29/5/2018 (It's 30/5/2018 here as I write this) we've broken through 1000 hits on this fic! Thank you very much, and I hope my fic continues to intrigue. Here's to more!
Roland could see some of the dogfolk soldiers staring horrified at him as he downed his third cup of double-strength tea before the scout returned. The groggy feeling in his head was finally gone- he should stop before he drank too much water. (While bringing along a kettle and a cup was slightly cumbersome, he remembered that drinking directly from the kettle was specified as most disrespectful back in Pexue and guessed Goldpaw would have similar etiquettes.)

“The scout’s back!” A voice from outside the tent, and the young dogfolk ran in, holding a long roll of paper and panting. “They’ve set up base in Sunrise Shore- in open ground, too, I could see what they use.” He unrolled the map, on which the congregates of bandits and their weapons were marked. Batu whistled. “Ye’ve got some fine eyes, lad. Good work.”

Min Ti rustled with pride. “He’s my best-trained ranger, after all. It’s expected. Now…” She pointed to the two dots marked with lances. “I believe Bai Gon and his axe-wielders will dispose of them easily-“ Her finger trailed to the barricades and a sketch that looked like a cannon while Bai Gon grunted in agreement. “-and we’ll take care of these before they notice your army.” “Wait, does that mean…” Evan said, and Min Ti nodded. “Us rangers will split off from the main group to sabotage the bandits’ facilities. Do you have objections?” “B-but…” Evan looked down, ears pressed against his hair. “You might be noticed by the bandits. Might get hurt. I…”

Min Ti bristled suddenly, and her hand slammed down on the table as she snarled. “Do not underestimate our strength, little king. Would you rather your army be vanquished by a cannonball blast?” Silence from the king, and the sharpshooter leaned in close, teeth near-baring. “Well?”

“No.” Evan cowered, and the dogfolk straightened up. “Good. Give us the call when you are ready to set off.” She strode out of the tent. “Howling Hunters, with me!”

The rest of the musketeers trailed out too- to prepare their weapons, most likely- leaving the rest of the army in the tent. Bai Gon, the old leader of the axe units, leaned to speak to Evan, who looked downcast. “Now, now. She may sound harsh, but it is rude to question a Goldpaw soldier’s abilities, Your Majesty.” The king looked up, wincing, “But… I am worried. I’m but a newcomer when it comes to skirmishes- what if people get hurt because I did something wrong? They are still my people… It’s my responsibility to keep them safe. I can’t let them get hurt.”

Behind the ruffles of silver fur, Bai Gon gave an aura of gentleness. “We can fight, yes? You have a good heart, but remember- the state of the leader will affect the people. Be strong.” He turned to Chingis, Khumbish and their groups of pirates, instantly taking on the strictness unique to a veteran warrior. “What are you doing? Do you believe your weapons are at top performance all the time?” “No, sir!” “Then go.” “Aye, sir!”

The tent was now empty save for the five, and Evan stared intensely at the map, fists clenched. Roland finally remembered- even on their first meeting, Evan had fretted over the Grimalkin soldiers they had run into. “Evan, are you okay?” He asked, and Evan’s frown grew deeper. “Ye know we can’t stand in for ye, lad.” Batu added. “This is yer time- no one can do what ye can.”

Evan closed his eyes and breathed in deeply before opening his eyes again, expression determined. “I can do this.” He declared. “I have to!” “There you go, mun.” Lofty grinned. “Let’s go outside.”
For a brief moment, Evan looked like he grimaced, but he marched into the clearing, clearing his throat. “Are all soldiers prepared and ready to deploy?” A united shout. “Aye!” “We will now begin our operation!”

Min Ti and her hunters slipped into the darkness, and Evan’s gaze followed her for a moment before returning to the army. “Everyone, with me!” “AYE!”

---

True to Min Ti’s word, by the time the army arrived at the barricades, the latter crumbled at the gentlest touch. The cannons were sparking and smoking, clearly having blown itself up. The bandits promptly scattered at the sight, each running for their own lives. “Not going to show their grimy heads around here anymore, trust me.” Bai Gon commented.

They had managed to infiltrate the bandits’ base within the woods, but the Howling Hunters were still nowhere to be seen. Evan’s composure was waverling. “Do you think we should get someone to find Min Ti and her team?” He whispered to Roland, who watched the sky pirates run out of the tents, shaking their heads- the bandits had long escaped. “I advise we send a scout ahead- we don’t have much manpower to use.” He answered, and Evan uttered a command to send one of the soldiers to check the situation.

A few minutes later, the scout returned. “The hunters… they’re in trouble! Monsters!” The young king’s eyes widened. “Soldiers! Charge!”

Once past the trees, they could see the musketeers struggling to dodge slashes from gigantic porc choppers, as groups of bandits jeered from the cliff. Evan lurched to run ahead, but stopped, frantic. “I-I can’t charge ahead…” He mumbled to himself. “I need something…” His eyes glanced around the clearing, then focused. “Khumbish!” He commanded, and the sky pirate ran to his side. “Aye, Yer Majesty?” “You and your men can aim, right?” “Aye, sir, we’re the best archers the Canyon’s witnessed.” Evan pointed to a cannon at the edge of the woods- both bandits and hunters were too busy fighting to notice it. “We’ll get the monsters’ attention and save the hunters! You man the cannon- use it on the monsters!” “But-” “‘There’s no time. People are getting hurt! I have to help them!’” “Aye!”

When the archers ran off, Evan raised his staff, charging a fireball and firing it at one of the giants. It turned around, and began charging at the army, swiping its sword. A dogfolk was caught up in the attack and was flung at a tree- and the young king, gritting his teeth, charged for a second fireball- “FIRE!” An arc of fire catapulted from the trees, and when the soldiers scattered, the cannonball exploded on the monster’s head, and it tumbled to its knees, bringing the other orc’s attention to the army.

The resulting battle was… chaotic was the only way to put it. Roaring, war crying, clanging of weapons and metal against armor, booms of cannons and explosions, even a few cracks of musketeers- The army did their best to swarm the giants, and finally the latter crumbled into monster dust. A few bandits had ran past them out of the fields.

Once the fight settled, the army turned its attention to casualties. Most of the musketeers had sat down on the ground, huffing and ripping leaves off soreaways to bite on. Two of the axe-wielding Silver Foxes ran to hold up the dogfolk that had been hurled onto a tree and a third cracked an Angel’s Tear, whispering hastily. Khumbish’s crew, having avoided most of the carnage, hurried to deliver healing items among the injured, and Batu joined them, bringing out his own supply. Evan stumbled back, covering his mouth with trembling hands. “W-what do I do now?” “The stone, mun.” Lofty reminded him. “You came here for the stone- where’s the bandit that has it?”
Min Ti stumbled next to them, dragging and throwing a bandit on their knees next to her. A gash on her shoulder bled, but she refused a soreaway Tani offered. “Not now.” The sharpshooter nodded at King Evan. “This’s the one. Cowards deserted her when you started fighting the orcs.” The masked, female bandit whined. “N-no fair! Y-you can’t just nick my favourite stone off me!” Min Ti snarled and raised her bad arm to press her musket against the back of the bandit’s head. “Give. It. It is not yours.”

The bandit squeaked and fumbled to bring out a dark, sparkling stone, and Min Ti handed it to the young king. “This… is the Starstone Boddly was talking about.” Evan confirmed. “What do we do with this bandit?” A pause as Evan pondered. “We hand her over to Goldpaw. She broke the laws there.” The sharpshooter nodded, then took the bandit by her collar and dragged her off, barking orders to bring rope.

Evan stored the Starstone carefully into his arms ring, and turned around, jolting at the sudden lack of people in the field. “Where… where did they go?” Tani pointed to the woods. “The tents the bandits left behind, most likely. We found plenty of mattresses in there.” The king of Evermore uttered a word of thanks and sprinted towards the tents, with the other two following close behind.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 31! Writing this skirmish was actually pretty hard! I've barely touched army-related games before, and the mechanics in the game... well, saying it's a bit wonky is the best way I can put it.

As you might've noticed, Evan's personal problem is something akin to a lack of faith in himself- which can equally be interpreted to a lack of faith in his people. I'll delve a bit into why personal problems keep being brought up by Boddly's trials in the end notes next chapter.

Min Ti's always struck me as a harsh sharpshooter even since her first impression. Bai Gon's slightly more grandpa-ish because he does see his students as grandson standins, but give him an army and you'll see how strict he also is.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The tents bustled with quiet activity. In one, the sky pirates and soldiers who only suffered minor injuries spread out the supplies and sorted them, and a few ran to take soreaways out of it, acting as transporters. Batu was watching the bound bandit closely, and waved briefly when the four entered.

The army had moved all the mattresses into the other tent in the brief time Evan had talked to Min Ti, and most of the injured laid or sat on them. The dogfolk from before had his armor taken off, but was still unconscious. Two other soldiers were busy grinding the soreaways into paste and applying them on the bruises, and a third one had reported to Bai Gon that the situation was under control.

“It’s King Evan.” One of the wounded spoke up, and the tent rustled as the idle soldiers looked at the young king, who stiffened.

“Uh…” Evan coughed. “Peace, soldiers. I want to thank you for helping in the operation- and for fighting valiantly against your foes.” His ears drooped slowly against his head. “And… I am sorry.”

The tent was silent except for the medics.

“First of all, I… I understand that you are brave, strong soldiers, but even before the battle, I have let my cowardice overcome me, and I let myself doubt that you will be able to handle your foes.” Evan bowed. “I truly apologize for that.” He straightened up, but the king’s posture was getting tenser every passing second. “And… as the king of Evermore, it is my responsibility that I protect my people from harm; no matter if they are the people who cannot fight, or those who can. Regardless of whether you will stay in Evermore after this or not, right now, you are citizens of Evermore, but…” Evan looked away. “…even in my- our first skirmish as the army of Evermore, I have failed in that regard.” He bowed again. “I apologize.”

The soldiers stared for a while, then a dogfolk rose his voice. “Did you really expect that you can get us through a horde of bandits without a scratch?” “N-” Evan’s voice cracked. “No, but it’s my-” “Do you know how many ways this could’ve gone wrong, Your Majesty? Especially for a newbie like you?” Min Ti spoke from the side of the tent. “In every single part of this operation, anything could. Rocks fall, we all die.” She stood up. “Count!”

Each soldier barked a number, starting from one and leading around the tent. A medic helped to report twice. A soldier who had just entered the tent shouted nineteen, and the sharpshooter’s gaze fell on him. “How many soldiers are in the other tent?” “Including me, eighteen, madam!” “Have we lost any men?” “No, madam!”

Evan’s shoulders shook as he tried to suppress his sobs. Min Ti stood up and marched towards the exit. “I’m going to go out and catch some fresh air.” As she passed Evan, she patted the young king on the soldier and whispered, “You’ve done well.”

Once Min Ti had exited, the tent bustled into action. “Someone get him a towel!” “A towel?! You’re a blessed dimwit! Here, don’t bow anymore-” “Come ‘ere and sit, Your Majesty, we’ll tell you our stories! You’ll be a veteran in no time!” With the hushed requests from the soldiers, Evan was led to sit with the soldiers, wiping his tears away and apologizing for the outburst, which lead to laughs and more words of comfort.
Lofty crossed his arms, humming. “Glad to see it’s a happy ending, en’it.”

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The night went on, and the conversations grew quieter as the soldiers told their recollections. Tani had gone to the other tent to accompany her father, and seeing that Evan was listening intently to the stories, Roland walked out of the barracks.

A cool breeze blew through the canyon, and Roland felt the temptation to go stand near the cliffs. He wasn’t very surprised to see Min Ti there as well, cape fluttering gently in the wind.

“I’m only here because of a debt to Gao Jia.” The huntress stated, sensing Roland’s presence. “I find him and his choices… interesting.”

The breeze caught up, and Min Ti turned to face the Chief Consul. “Your king is too sentimental. Too harsh with himself. And too young.” Roland crossed his arms. “He’s still learning, Miss Min Ti.” A chuckle from the dogfolk. “Did I say those are bad traits? Vulnerability promotes trust. Self-awareness averts mistakes. Age- the lack of it- prevents fear.” Min Ti smirked- or was it a smile? “Most importantly, he knows where his responsibilities lie- his people. An interesting king, indeed.”

They stood for a while, watching the moon shine over the shoreline before the sharpshooter stretched, yawned and left bidding good night, leaving Roland to sit down on the grass and ponder.

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Again, he got no sleep- he was sure it was the tea that took away any sense of weariness throughout the night. On retrospect, Roland truly regretted making it double the strength out of whatever competitiveness he felt at the time, and when he half-stumbled into the camp, Lofty again was quick to point it out.

“Goo-morn’. They’ve buried the leftover tea with the kettle, mun. Like some kind of extra tainted monster.” “…shut up, Lofty.”

Evan’s eyes were still puffy, but he greeted Roland with a smile- initially. “Good- uh… A-are you alright?” “Yeah.” He grinned. “I’m fine.” “And we’re seeing the Chief Consul’s trademark smile again, en’it.” Lofty commented.

The troops who had been resting in the tents gathered in the clearing- the soldier who had been an unfortunate victim of the tree was on a makeshift stretcher, briefly raising his thumb up when a second dogfolk checked for attendance. Bai Gon and Min Ti stood in front of them while their soldiers got into line.

“All soldiers are present!” After the report, the two generals faced Evan. “Well, well… We’ll take our leave, won’t we?” Bai Gon chuckled. “You have plenty to learn from Gao Jia when you return, Your Majesty.” “I’ll do my best.” Evan answered, placing his hand across his chest. Min Ti simply nodded, and soon, the blue glow of teleportation engulfed the army, leaving nothing in its place. The five- along with the bandit- soon cast their own spell to get back to Goldpaw.

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“You got it back! You got it back! Beautiful, wonderful boy!” And Boddly was back at it again. “Bright! So shiny, shiny, shiny! Mmm! Blinding! Like a shiny, shiny star!” She smiled at Evan. “You did it! Yessss! Thought you’d make a terrible mess of everything! That you’d be slaughtered! But you did it! Yess!”
The librarian mumbled to herself—something akin to gathering everything she needed. “It’s time, my loves, it’s time! At long last!” What, the library card hand-over ceremony? Some kind of sagely explanation? Boddly scratched her fur collar, grinning ominously. “Time to make up the most marvellous make-up that’s ever been made up—the luscious, lascivious, lustrous lipstick Boddly likes to call… Gobsmear!”

A few moments, and Roland decided to break the silence, corners of his mouth turning upwards. “Excuse me?”

The library burst into a hubbub, with Lofty jumping and declaring loudly, “Hang on a flippin’ minute! You put us through all that just for a new shade o’ flippin’ lippy?” The librarian cackled. “I need it! Don’t know when handsome young men might come along! Yesss! I’ll just pop it on. Mmm! Wait here, dears… heehee…”

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It was indeed lipstick.

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“A lovely little library card filled with all Boddly’s love! You can now read it! All the knowledge in this world sleeps on these shelves! Yesss! All of it, to wallow in! Bathe in! Slather over your little minds! Heeheeeheee…”

Boddly strolled away, cackling to herself and bringing out a Leafbook. Roland turned to Evan, who held up the card. “I’m leaving.”


“I need to hunt down books about the nations of your world. And I need another cup of tea before I start.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 32! Roland needed a quick reboot towards the end there.

As promised, here's a bit of explanation: the personal events are basically things the four need to take a step in fixing before they can fully put their hearts into Evermore: from last chapter, Evan's problem is a lack of experience and faith in himself, which makes him blind to what he is capable of. Batu and Tani's is their mourning for their wife/mother respectively that they hadn't had closure on yet: while they're eager to help Evermore out, the strong bond still holds them at the sky pirates' base. Roland's is keeping his problems/himself a secret, which both affects the building of trust and his emotional state. From Evan's point of view, the trials helps him learn about other people's stories.

The thought of making the trials personally relevant only took shape while I was writing the chapters for the second trial, so you can see how Roland's isn't directly related to the trial. I guess it still fits since he's an otherworlder, haha.

Next chapter's reading time! Sit tight.
Roland moved the catalogue of Broadleaf back on top of the pile, half-sighing and half-yawning. He should’ve noticed from the first time they came to the library that those books were literally rocks- they were slabs with words carefully etched into it. Very heavy.

The situation of the world he was in was… interesting.

He saw from Goldpaw that it was ruled completely by dice rolls. Hydropolis was, simply put, a police state. Broadleaf was heavily polluted and under local conflict due to development, and the situation in Ding Dong Dell was... well, as it was. And each of them had their own shares of war-whether it was between settlements, resources or races. Some things never change.

“Quite the hardworking student, aren’t you?” A woman’s voice, and Roland looked up to see Mileniyah standing at the table, holding a bag. “Hello, professor. Didn’t see you in the library.” “That’s because I’ve only just gotten back.” The lady opened her bag, and after a bit of shuffling, took out a book cover and placed it with a clack onto the table. “For you.”

Roland held the piece of cardboard in his hands. It was a muddled slate gray. He flipped it open, and there was a single page. He squinted at the historian. “This is…?” Mileniyah tutted. “I’ll have to dock marks off you for forgetting about the Dreamer’s Doors so soon. Since you will inevitably travel around the world, this is a storage unit I have fashioned to help you store your findings-complete with fast attaching, preservation and decoding magic. Just touch the edge of the page to the spine.” He remembered that the young king was also in on this… project. “What about Evan?” “I’ve given him his, do not worry.”

The professor knocked on the table twice. “Now that I have given you the means to collect the pages, I will be looking forward to your full contributions to the record of history.” With that, the historian took her leave. Roland glanced between the not-exactly-book and the retreating figure, before picking it the former up and looking at the yellowed paper. This was a record from one of the ancient nations, Mileniyah said…

The writing was in tidy block letters and black ink. A marking on the upper left corner let him know this was some sort of diary, and a number to its right, partially smudged: was it some sort of date? Ah well. He began to read.

Entry- 2091-

Today was the funeral for my king and queen- and with it, my inheritance to their prince. He had done so with the sword his parents have left behind, sobbing, and once everyone had left, I had tried my best to comfort him. My new king is very young and unsure of himself, but he is brave and kind. Just like his father and mother had been. I still cannot believe they are gone- They had only been on their anniversary trip when disaster struck, and having put their privacy first, I could not get there in time.

But I cannot mourn- one must dedicate their cause to their king. And I will. I must try to be to him a parent- I will be the one to educate him in the ways to be king. I have watched kings lead their nation, so my king will have much experience to learn. I am sure it is what his parents had wanted.
So the writer was some sort of… caretaker? Roland mused, closing the book and putting it away. The wording of ‘inheritance’ itched at him- but perhaps it was just a case of culture.

“Ah! There you are, Roland.” Evan had settled down opposite the table with his own stack of stone books and an ash-green book cover. “How goes it?” Lofty jumped onto the table as the other man thought. “There’s been quite a lot of wars in the history of your world.” Roland concluded. “Well, the same goes for mine, but with a nation as new as Evermore, I say the only way for us to steer clear of all the fighting is to have no contact with any of them whatsoever. Period.”

“Hm…” Evan took one of the books off of the stack. “What if we unite the world, then? If the world was one big country, then there’d be no one to fight, right?” “That’s true- but that’s very ambitious.” Too ambitious, even. “It took decades for nations in my world to finish drafting a peace treaty, and then more decades to finalize it and put it to action.” And… it fell apart within years. Roland chose not to mention it.

“What are you two up to?” Tani had strolled over, Batu following close behind. “We’re talking about how we should go about with our nation’s foreign relations.” Evan answered, “I’m proposing that we unite the world.” A grunt from Batu, who kept his expression well-hidden. “Hrm. But there’s no history where any o’ the kingdoms did that. Or came close to doin’ that.”

“Heeheeehee!” Boddly was an expert at sneaking behind people. “Oh yes they have! Mmm!” She walked closer to the table, setting her staff down. “Ferdinand! Mighty Ferdinand! Wrote a great treaty! Declaration of Interdependence! Got them all to sign it! Great big countries, teeny weeny countries, all of them! Yesss! He was a hero! My hero!” She scratched her fur collar. “Mmmm…”

Tani grinned at Evan. “So someone HAS done it before!” The king didn’t look convinced, however, “But… I read through all of the ancient histories, and there wasn’t any mention of his name.” “Of course not!” Boddly cackled, “Only special people know! It’s top-secret! Mmm…”

Evan stared at the table. “King Ferdinand…” He nodded. “Alright, everyone. Let’s head back to Evermore and decide what we’re going to do next- we need to talk more about this banner of ours.”

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“So Evan lad’s head-set on making this Declaration, eh?” Lofty commented, picking whatever nostril he had. “What’s your thoughts, Chief Consul? There’s a reason why you called the Kingmaker himself in your room- office, whichever helps you sleep.”

Roland put the pen aside, shuffling the papers he had just written the peace treaty of his world onto. He could remember each word of it by heart. “Take a look, Lofty. See if I need to change anything… well, if they’re different here.” “Shucks- your grand Chief Consul calls a Kingmaker in to be a flippin’ beta reader!” Lofty’s eyes darted over the first few pages of draft. “Aye, it’s too convoluted, my man! Here- lemme help.” A glow of light, and the many pages melded into one. Roland squinted at Lofty, just a bit upset. “Did… did you even read it?” “I’ve got magical readin’ powers, don’tcha know?”

The Chief Consul sighed, reading the singular page. It was short, but… it did cover the main points, he guessed. He wasn’t upset, not…not at all. “I’m not here just to ask you to read over the treaty, you see. Can you try making it into… a scroll?” “Aye, easy as cake, mun!” Another glow of light, and the paper transformed into a simple scroll.

“Hmm… Can you make it… prettier?” “Sure.” The scroll became adorned with gold and green decorations, the paper similarly furnished by a green sigil and red markings along the edge. “And uh, make the words appear only when the scroll is unfurled?” “Aye…” “Can you make it float?”
Lofty stamped his foot on the ground as the scroll hovered upwards. “I’m not a magician, ye flippin' heck!” Roland grabbed the scroll, smirking. “Thanks, Lofty. Needed the… touch of grandeur.” It was almost time for the meeting, anyway. He pushed open the door, and stepped out into the corridor.

“Youer gloves, mun! Youer gloves!” Lofty hissed.

Oh, hell. Roland glanced quickly at his right hand- ungloved and swirling dark. He hid it behind him, and looked around to see if anyone was looking before retreating back into the room and putting on his trusty gloves. He didn’t see anyone. Hopefully no one saw him either.


Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 33! I've always found Roland taking a very magical scroll out of nowhere kind of curious so naturally there'd be a little quip on it.

Also, we're finally getting to read the Dreamer's notes(tentative name)! There'll be a couple more of those- I'll see when I can slip them in for reads.

With that, we've gotten through 50k words! ay
“Strange thing you’re holding there, Roland.” Tani commented when the Chief Consul and the Kingmaker entered the meeting room. “You’ll see what the strange thing is later.” Roland answered, keeping his amusement in when he saw Lofty grumble. He glanced around the room. Evan sat on one of the wooden stump-chairs, waiting for the meeting to begin. Batu stood next to Tani on the other side of the table, squinting too at the scroll Roland was holding.

Niall hurried into the room, running a hand across his forehead. “I didnae miss anything, did I?” Evan greeted him. “You’re… right on time.” Once everyone but the king, the Chief Consul, and the Kingmaker (who understandably stood on one of chairs) had taken their seats, Roland cleared his throat.

“Let’s begin, shall we? As Evan had said, this meeting is to speak about our nation’s ‘banner’- the cause we mean to unite under and work towards together. Evan proposes that we create a country without war.” He remembered that Boddly had said King Ferdinand’s existence was a secret, and Niall wasn’t there to hear it. “I’d like to talk about the concrete measures we’ll need to take in order for that to happen.”

Roland pointed and gestured in a circle around the map. “First and foremost, we’ll need to sign a treaty with the other major nations of this world, effectively forming a single, united realm. We propose to call this treaty the Declaration of Interdependence—” He put the scroll on the table and began to unroll it. “—and with the… ahem, help of our Kingmaker, I’ve taken the liberty of drawing up a preliminary version.”

A bit of time was given for everyone to inspect, and Evan nodded. “The Declaration will be our banner. The cause for which we fight.” “I like it.” Tani commented, then crossed her arms. “Except… wouldn’t that Naverre whatever be trying to mess things up in other countries like he did in Goldpaw?” “We think that’s highly likely, yes.” Roland answered. “But we can’t worry about that right now- with the current development of Evermore, all we can do is to visit each nation in turn and try to convince them to sign up.”

Batu growled- not a good sign. “Ye’re really thinkin’ o’ doin’ this? Ye realise it’s a fool’s errand, don’t ye?” Roland met the other’s glare. “What do you mean?”

The Cloud Snake ran a hand through his moustache. “Sure, this plan o’ yours is a noble one, and a fine banner for an up-and-comin’ kingdom to unite under… But ye’re about as likely to get all nations o’ the world to sign yer lil’ pact as I am to grow a third leg!” Tani muttered a hasty ‘Dad!’, but Roland felt he had to get the situation under control. “Don’t say that: we can do this.” He said, carefully. His legs ached for some reason.

Batu stood up, sending a stool-stump tumbling to the ground. “Says the man who just strode in from who-knows-where! Who knows what else ye have up yer sleeve, huh?”

Roland’s heart lurched. “And what do you know about running a country, huh?” He had blurted out the sentence before he had realized. Batu bristled, “I’ll have ye know I’ve never seen a king in here history that’s called—”

“Stop it!” Evan exclaimed, silencing both adults. The room was silent for a moment as the young
king cleared his throat. “I… I don’t know if we can do this. But it doesn’t matter: I want to do it anyway.” He pushed a lock of hair from his face. “I’ve realized something. Now that we’ve been to all these places and met all these people, I don’t want to just do it for Nelly. I want to do it for myself. For all of us. I really do want to make a world where everyone can be happy.” The king stood, grand and solemn. “And I don’t care if we might not succeed. That’s no reason to give up.”

Evan took the scroll in his hands. “Of course it won’t be easy getting all of the countries of the world to sign our agreement- but if there’s even a chance of success, I’d like to try. And I need all of your help to do it.”

Batu grunted and scratched the back of his head, aggressiveness withering. “Arr… how can a man say no to such a speech, lad? I’m with ye, Your Majesty, come what may.” Lofty jumped onto the table. “Better start with an easy one, eh? I reckon Goldpaw’ll sign up.” “As long as Pugnacious’s not the grudge-bearing type…” Tani’s statement was quickly interrupted by Niall. “As far as I know, auld Pug dinnae have it in ‘im, laddess. And he owes us one, yeah?” The elder Greenling tapped his nest of branches. “Although I advise you not rush it- Goldpaw may be permanently nocturnal, but they still have a strict note o’ time when it comes to anythin’ that ain’t betting.”

The young king nodded. “Good. Then it’s decided- we’ll unify the world.” He raised the scroll. “May hope bless Evermore!”

As the meeting was announced to be over, Roland tapped Evan on his shoulder, half-smiling. “If you’ll excuse me, I… have some napping to catch up on.” The younger boy nodded. “Sure! You’ve worked a lot.”

Did he want to give similar regards to the two sky pirates? Roland glanced at the father-daughter pair, who were in conversation. Maybe… no. No. He strode out of the meeting room.

---

Roland closed the door behind him quietly, marched to his bed and threw himself face-down, on it, remembering to kick his boots off afterwards. His throat hurt as though he had just yelled. He didn’t. He didn’t want to, either.

He had truly hoped relations would improve after the trials. Sure, Roland still needed to come clean about his origins, but he really hoped sharing and knowing was a start.

And now his emotions got the better of him- again. As usual.

Raising his right hand, Roland clenched it into a fist and struck the wall with it. A loud thump resounded, and the lack of pain- no, a lack of anything- only made him want to bury his face further into the bed covers.

Loud knocking on the door. “What?” He called out. Nothing, but through the walls he could hear muffled conversation. Roland lifted his head up from the bed, about to tell whoever was outside that he was about to take a nap, then- a voice. “It’s nothin’.”

The room was silent again, and Roland let his head fall into the bed once more. The boiling frustration had melted away, replaced by bone-aching exhaustion.

Perhaps a nap was a good idea. He closed his eyes, already sensing as though he was falling through. Perhaps it was.

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“You can’t keep everything from everyone forever, Roland.”

Roland lowered a spoon into his own cup of tea, stirring slowly. The ever-present plume of steam slowly wafted upwards. “Oh yeah? We’ve been in the same dream for who knows how long, and I still feel like I barely know anything about you.”

“We both have our reasons.” Doloran simply answered.

There was silence in the dream. The masked man coughed. “Forgive me… I spoke unwisely.” A pause. “Is it… alright if I ask what happened to this treaty in your world?”

Roland continued stirring. Can he tell this person? His gut feeling told him yes. Even if this person existed outside of the dream, the knowledge of some nation’s collapse in another world would be useless. And with the recent development, he couldn’t tell anyone anymore. He nodded. “It was the first worldwide peace treaty, proposed decades ago, and finalized by the time I became president. It was the last major achievement by Aquila’s- my nation’s previous leader.”

The spoon hit the edge of the cup once. “Things went fine for the first three years, but then there was a local conflict in one of the participating countries, large enough in scale to be considered a violation of the treaty but was resolved quickly. The nations under the treaty began to argue whether to apply economic sanctions as punishment as stated in the treaty, and relations between countries deteriorated rapidly as they began to took sides. Eventually they looked to Aquila for advice- it was determined that the nation should be penalized, but by the time it was done, there was already an immeasurable rift between the countries.”

A sharp cling echoed in the room again. “I took action too late, and I paid for it. As the center of the troubles, I was… persuaded to step down from presidency to take account for the flaws in the peace treaty.” There were so many emails and meetings that delved into his inability to lead and struck down any replies with the simple yet effective ‘but you caused this mess!’. “And when news got out that I was about to resign, other nations either saw it as cowardice or a chance for them to grapple for influence.”

Roland let go of the spoon. It hit the cup with a clang and fell still. The room felt too bright, so he closed his eyes and squeezed between his brows. “I… well. After a lot of negotiations, I managed to convince the leaders to gather to try to find a way forward for them, but…” He remembered the plume of fire on the horizon. A scent of burning oil and skin. “A nation took the chance to destroy mine.” And his famil- not now. Not relevant. A bitter laugh to distract. “Funny how a peace treaty caused a war.”

“But you haven’t told Evan about it.” Doloran spoke quietly. “Surely you still see some hope in world peace.” “I…” He didn’t know. “I have faith in Evan.” The lack of age prevents fear, he remembered Min Ti saying. He stared down at his cup of tea, the surface of the liquid becoming completely still.

The masked man was about to say something, but didn’t. They sat in silence, watching twin plumes of steam gather in the air until Doloran said it was time to go and the dream melted away.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 34!
Seems like someone didn't learn much from all that reading.
“Master Pugnacius- it has been a while.” “And so it has, young Evan. I am glad to see you well.”

Ya Pi, being the ever-reliable general of Goldpaw, had quickly assisted in arranging the team’s audience with the Grand High Roller. Pugnacius, of course, was eager to meet with the young king of Evermore. The mood was dampened when the leader of Goldpaw brought up the subject of Naverre and the Horned One, however.

“Since you so kindly shared Naverre’s identity and the details of his wicked scheme, my men have been working tirelessly to apprehend him…” Pugnacius tugged on his whisker. “...without success, I am sorry to say.” “I believe he has escaped to a different nation.” Evan proposed, “So your men are not at fault.”

“Hm…” The pug settled down on his throne. “Even now, I cannot believe that he- I allowed him to steal my kingsbond. You may have heard of my wish to make Goldpaw more wealthy. I… I lived in penury as a child. I wished only to build a country where no one would suffer as I did… But no matter how hard I tried, I could not eliminate poverty entirely. The truth of it unsettled me. And by letting myself be distracted by this matter, I offered this Naverre an opening. It will not happen again.”

Roland remembered a part from Goldpaw’s history. “I heard the majority of the taxes generated by Lady Luck were intended to help the poor. Is that true?” Pugnacius nodded. “You are correct. And my weakness corrupted Her noble purpose… But that’s enough of my woes. How may I help you?”

Evan stepped forward. “We come to ask you to join your kingdom with ours in the name of peace. United, we may stand a chance against Naverre, and return your kingsbond to you.” He brought out the scroll and held it out. “To that end, we have drawn up a treaty: the Declaration of Interdependence. I hope to convince all the nations in this world to sign it.”

With the one instance of a similar treaty succeeding being confidential, Pugnacius was appropriately surprised. “All the great nations agreeing on something? And something as momentous as this? The chances are remote, I’m afraid… But Goldpaw will stand beside you in your endeavour. After all, without you, there is no Goldpaw.” Evan’s face lit up. “That’s wonderful!” Pugnacius chuckled. “Indeed… I hope Lady Luck agrees.”

Roland buried his face in his hand. Of course… of course. He could hear Tani exclaim in disbelief, “Are you kidding me?”

“I am not.” Pugnacius squinted- he was serious, indeed. “You know full well that in Goldpaw, all such decisions are entrusted to fortune.” Evan was doing his ’without humor’ smile again. “Well… yes, but if you insist…” The Grand High Roller stood up. “Very well. I will arrange for the ceremony by Lady Luck.”

As Ya Pi hurried to accompany Pugnacius out of the throne, Batu snorted. “Bet that’s why they’ve such a strict timetable- they haven’t got all day to set up those platforms.”

A round of chuckles, and Roland managed a smile. He was probably still overreacting to whatever happened the day before. Why was he doing that?
After an hour or so of arranging wooden platforms around the square, Goldpaw was finally ready. Pugnacius stepped onto the square, raising his arms. The citizens of Goldpaw watched cautiously. "Lady Luck! We ask you to guide us in the matter of this union!" He brought his scepter down. "An odd number will show us that you deem it wise."

Once more, the statue clattered to life, raising a die in its hand and dropping it. The onlookers held their breaths. The dice bounced. dropping on the corner between two and four… finally falling to a two. There were groans all around the audience, Lofty included. Pugnacius turned around, sighing. "Alas, Lady Luck has decreed that this pact shall not be signed."


The citizens murmured while Evan failed to form sentences. “The world is in danger,” The Grand High Roller continued. “We stand together or we fall. Goldpaw must join you in alliance, king of Evermore.” He stepped down from the square, holding his hand at his chest in a gesture of invitation. “Will you be so kind to join me in the Grand High Roller’s Hall?”

The young king blinked twice before his surprised expression turned into a smile. “Master Pugnacius… we are in your debt! Thank you!”

As the two kings went up the stairs, the citizens of Goldpaw exploded in cheers.

---

“Now, this scroll of yours… Huh, it can float? That’s interesting.”

Evan glanced at Roland, who coughed. “We had our Kingmaker do some… adjustments.” “I see.” Pugnacius smiled, “I suppose you have done all necessary preparations for the signing of the pact?” The young king took out his royal wand. “Of course, Master Pugnacius.” “Very well. Let us not delay any longer.”

Lofty clapped his hands, and the scroll glowed, unfurling. Lines of runes rolled into view, and the two kings nodded at each other. Evan stepped forward, holding his wand into the air in front of the banner and speaking, “Let our nations be joined, for the sake of the world…” Pugnacius did the same, holding his scepter, “Let the banners of war ne’er be unfurled…” The two items of importance struck each other, a gold light shining from between. “United we stand, as one single land!”

The sigil on the paper rose from the scroll and glowed green- for a moment, the five circles turned- a dragon was on one of them- and a pattern that looked like Longfang appeared on another before being absorbed back into the paper once more. The scroll rolled up, and Evan caught it as it floated downwards.

“And there.” Pugnacius settled back on his throne. “I suppose you are to visit the other countries to gain more signatories for the declaration? I suggest going to Hydropolis first, but you will require a boat to cross the sea to do so.”

They didn’t have a boat. Roland remembered the Wind-Whipper spell, and proposed a question, “Is there a spell we can use to fly there?” “Ha! You never cease to amuse me, Roland.” The Grand High Roller tugged on a whisker. “Even if one existed, it’d be impossible to sustain such magic for the entire length of the journey.” “nd birdmobiles are out o’ the question, lad-” Batu said, “There’s no wind I’ve heard o’ that can be relied upon for blow a man that sort o’ distance.” Roland nodded.

Pugnacius took out a map from the corner of his throne, unfurled it, and pointed at the lower corner
of the continent they were on. “A visit to Capstan-upon-Hull would seem to be in order. Their shipwrights are second to none- and they are vassals of Goldpaw. I will send word of your coming.” Evan nodded, “Thank you, Master Pugnacius. I’ll convince all the other nations to sign up to the Declaration, I promise!” The Grand High Roller spread his arms. “I sincerely hope you do, King Evan. May fortune smile upon you.”

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“Just a few more now.”

An orb of crimson floated into a pillar, the latter’s coiling structure darkening into a sickly black-purple. Fingers slid over the surface of a vat of water, the latter lighting up with the image of a town. The snake-headed man peered into it.

“Brineskimmer…” The image morphed into that of a fish-like creature. “Kingmaker of Hydropolis.”

The king of Allegoria touched the surface of water, watching it change to show a group of four, and the tiniest Kingmaker he has seen yet. They had just stopped at the gates of Goldpaw, seemingly gathering around for a conversation. He spread his fingers to zoom in on the golden-haired halfling, then to a dark-haired man, who briefly looked away, confused. His mouth curled to reveal a snarl, and the man disappeared into a vortex of black.

Chapter End Notes

And we're uh done with Goldpaw? I guess?

Thank you for reading Chapter 35! We'll be getting on a boat soon. It's unfortunately another part of plot that jumps all over the place location-wise, so I'll see what I can do.
So drinking all that tea really was a terrible idea, Roland thought. He'd had a few instances of heartburn back when he was still chugging coffee and pulling all-nighters to make long-distance phone calls, but feeling the stab of pain behind his sternum as a twenty-year-old was an entirely different thing.

Thudding his fist against his chest a couple of times, he noticed Tani staring at him. Roland waved his hand, smiling mildly. “It’s nothing—probably just something I ate.”

Evan had been walking a few steps ahead, hand on chin. Batu took note of it, calling the young king’s name. “What’d ye been in yer head about? Ye’ve been doin’ that for since we did the pact.” Evan turned around, frowning. “Capstan-upon-Hull’s a protectorate of Goldpaw… and I remember from the books on the local culture that the people there, mostly humanfolk, would visit Goldpaw for entertainment.” His eyes narrowed. “Then why haven’t we seen a single humanfolk other than the Broadleaf tourist for the time we’ve been in Goldpaw?”

The Cloud Snake scratched his head. “Ye mean there’s trouble down in Caps’?” “Not exactly…” Evan tilted his head and pondered. “Maybe the shipwrights are busy making ships. Hm…”

The nocturnal influence faded away, revealing a shoreline brightly illuminated by daylight. Tani brought her hands to her eyes, whistling. “That’s one mighty sun.” “A nice change of environment.” Evan replied.

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Capstan-upon-Hull was a port sitting squat behind a line of limestone cliffs—a wooden shelter and a flag-lined entrance made it hard to miss. But…

“There… doesn’t seem to be a lot of activity,” Tani noted. “Not a lot of people, either.” As the sharp-eyed pirate girl had pointed out, there were only scattered pairs of people, strolling around and wringing their arms. One of the humanfolk noticed them, and hurried over.

“Ey up!” The woman in khaki waved in greeting. “Ye didn’t ‘appen to see a gang o’ shipbuilders on yer way ‘ere, did ye?” She raised a hand two heads higher than Evan, whose tail swished. “They’re around this tall— a bit older than ye folks, and twice as strappin’— except the man o’er there wi’ the bandana.” “No…” Evan answered. “We didn’t see anyone.” “Ye didn’t? Fair enough. That’s prob’ly for the best, in fact. On yer way, then.”

The group walked further in, the state of the port becoming more apparent: they could only count five, six people other than themselves; no boats at all. “I smell trouble all right, Evan lad.” Batu grunted, then pointed at an elder. “He looks like he’d be the head o’ the place. Go ask ‘im.”

The elder noticed the finger pointing and shuffled over. “‘Ow do. You’ll be this King Evan old Puggie told us about, eh?” The half-Grimalkin raised his hand. “Yes, that’s me.” “Aye… well, ye’re a bit shorter than I were imaginin’… but nice to meet you, Yer Majesty. Name’s Wright— I’m the gaffer round these parts.” Mr. Wright scratched his head. “Puggie told me what ye’re after, but I’m not best fixed to help you just now, if I’m honest.”

And something was up. “What happened?” Evan asked, prompting the gaffer to sigh. “It’re a few
days back now: a load o’ t’ boats were out fishin’ when a monster showed up and smashed the lot of ‘em to bits. A bunch o’ t’ young’uns went out lookin’ to snickersneeze the thing, but the poor blokes haven’t been seen since.” Mr. Wright huffed. “I’ve half a mind to go out after t’ reckless wallies mesen, but I’d only get walloped, like as not.”

Knowing Evan, the young king would never let someone be in need of help. “Mr. Wright, we’ll go and see what’s happened to the other villagers.” “Shurrup! Really?” The shipwright bowed briefly. “Well, go on then. I’ll not turn down an offer o’ help. Last time I heard from t’lads were that they’d go to the old shrine down t’ coast- there’s only one, it’s hard to miss. E’ smashed them boats up like they were nowtn’, so watch yerselves, eh?”

Mr. Wright blinked as though remembering something, turned and struck a boat’s frame behind him, and with a shout, Lofty tumbled into the raft next to it, barely missing the water.

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The shrine looked curiously like a kraken with four tentacles sticking out of the water, Roland noted. It smelt like the sea- as in, it stunk like brine, increasingly so as the team entered the damp interior. The interior of the shrine was dark, and Evan had to bring out his wand to cast some light into the place; even that was just enough to see their surroundings.

“Hmm… Can’t help but notice a glarin’ lack o’ shipbuilders…” Batu grumbled. “Could the wretched thing’ve gobbled ‘em up?” Evan peered into the further corners of the shrine and pointed. “That’s weird… Can you see that thing on top of the platform?” Tani followed the young king’s finger, and brought her hand to her forehead in a looking gesture. “Huh… yeah, that’s weird!”

Together, the five scurried closer to the platform, where some… white cocoon was attached to a slab of rock. Under the rock was a gap with a plate in it. “Looks like some sort of cocoon to me…” Roland said. Tani stood under the cocoon, and reached her hand to pat it-

Muffled yelling came from inside of the cocoon, soon followed by similar cries from more cocoons all around the room. Batu looked around the walls, and brought out his axe. “Crikey- there’re people in them?! All o’ the darned things? We’d best start cuttin’ them out-”

There was some sort of gut feeling- that something was there. “Wait.” Roland muttered, glancing around. “We’re not alone here.” He didn’t see anything- his eyesight wasn’t the best, but-

A whistling sound from above, towards them- “Batu, move!” He’d pushed the pirate aside before he knew it, and jumped to the other side as something landed with a splat between them. In the light from Evan’s wand, it was some sort of mucus- which quickly dried into white strands. Was it some sort of spider? Roland tried to look in the direction where the attack had come from, eyes darting left to right- “There!” Batu had already docked an arrow on his bow and shot it towards the ceiling. A few moments later, something- a large, four-eyed, nest-headed octopus? fell to the floor, an arrow sticking out of one of its tentacles. It clambered to its limbs and screeched, bouncing. “What the hell is that?” He heard Tani yell behind him. “A Jelly Queen, mun!” Lofty replied. “And it’s ready to thrash!”

The Jelly Queen bounced up, revealing triple eyes and a mouth under each of its six tentacles- this was certainly nothing like a jelly!, his alarmed mind shouted- and landed harshly on the floor, sending a shockwave through the ground. Evan and Tani scampered off of the platform, letting the group spread out. Seeing that it was surrounded the monster screeched again, raising its tentacles. Red light gathered at its tips, then- was his eyesight failing him or were those lasers? This world never ceased to amaze- one of the lazers whizzed past him, fizzling into sparks.
“We need to keep it from getting near the walls!” Evan yelled. “We don’t know what the beams will do to the cocoons!” “Or we could just- ye know-” Batu swung his axe down, barely missing one of the tentacles, at which he growled and attacked again, “-cut off the damned thing’s wiggles!”

A limb from the monster rose to swing down on the Cloud Snake, but Tani had run behind the latter to counter with a volley of sparking arrows- Batu took the chance to slam his weapon on the stunned appendage, severing it. Two yells of triumph, and Tani was letting the electricity-charged arrows fly again, followed by homing magic from Evan. Roland alternated between firing off Heavy Ammo and slashing at the monster- not much else to offer element-wise. He saw the monster swim through air a few times and did his best to not let the peculiar sight distract him. Another tentacle was lopped off- the Jelly Queen prepared to bounce but was intercepted by a timely cannonball shot by Runcible- one last volley of spark arrows settled the fight as the aquatic(?) monster tumbled to the floor and dissolved into dust.

Tani raised her leg, sticking her tongue out at the sight of dried goop coating the bottom of it- it reminded Roland of gum, for whatever reason- on the bottom of her shoe. “Ew- that’s going to take ages to get off.” Evan turned to run to the cocoons, ready to help the victims out of them. “Let’s hurry! They might be in danger!”

Roland was about to follow when he felt something lumpy brush against his forehead. Oh forces above, don’t let it be… he reached his fingers up, and to his horror, it was the same dried gum- goop that was tangled in his hair.

Oh no.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 36! As it turns out I’d had half a mind to hurry and get the damn ship done both in my playthrough and in the drafts, haha.

There won’t be too much to deal with for these couple of boat-building chapters so you’ll see that it’ll stick to plot, mostly.
Boy, was Roland thankful that his twenty-year-old self decided it was cool to keep his hair bushy and in a ponytail. He ran his hands through his hair one last time to check if there were any more gum-embedded bits. Didn’t feel like there were, so Roland handed the small knife back to the shipwright he had borrowed from and tied up his hair again. His bangs probably looked a lot shorter and choppier than before, but it’d grow out. That was miles better than having to go around bald, or something similar. (Not that he didn’t like bald hairstyles- he just had a feeling he wouldn’t wear it well.)

The rest of the band of shipwrights sat on the floor, stretching their limbs and picking the last bits of white strands off of them. One of the older looking ones stood up, doing some sort of strange exclamation as he talked to the five rescuers..

“Eeee- thank crikey we’re out o’ there!” The semi-bald shipwright said. “I thought I was a goner! Ye brayed that beast good ‘nd proper, eh? Right tasty, ye are! Not like us lot!” Evan waited until the man had stopped guffawing before raising his question. “You are the men Mr. Wright’d said gone missing, right? He’s awfully worried about you all.” “Ha! I bet he were- there’ll be nowt’ gettin’ done wi’ all o’ us gummed up here. We’d best get back sharpish or we’ll ne’er hear the end o’ this!” He turned around, and the shipwrights hurried to their feet. “Wait!” Evan blurted. “Let us escort you- we have to make sure you get back to Capstan-upon-Hull.” “Right, lad-o.”

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The people at Capstan were relieved to see their colleagues return, hurrying over to check on the latter. The woman that had chatted with Evan when they first entered the port walked over- and proceeded to chop each and every one of the younger shipwrights on their head with the heel of her hand. By the time she was done, she flicked her wrist twice, puffing air onto it. “Ye’re idiots, the lot of ye.” She huffed. “Do ye know how much work ye’ve been missin’ on?” “Aye, missie!” Said lot of shipwrights grinned sheepishly.

Mr. Wright smiled as he spoke to Evan. “Ey up, Yer Majesty- thanks to ye, the lads are all safe ‘n sound. Ye’ve done Capstan-upon-Hull a huge favor, and then some.” The half-bald man- Ketch, as he’d introduced himself on the way back to the place- guffawed. “Ye should’ve seen ‘im! The kid’s a flippin’ animal- clobbered that thing wot snatched us like it were nowt! Bosh!” Evan chuckled, embarrassed, and Mr. Wright smacked Ketch’s head with his palm. “Who ye’re calling ‘kid’, ye sackless oaf! This i’nt some bain from down t’ road, this’s a king! King Evan o’ the Heartlands, I’ll have ye know!”

“Shurrup!” Ketch looked at Evan, raising his eyebrows in surprise. “A king, at ‘is age? But what’s he doin’ comin’ from o’er t’hill and rescuin’ the lot o’ us?” “We need shipbuilders.” Evan explained, “Mr Wright told us his shipbuilders need help.” “So that’s it, then? Well, King Evan, if it’s boathbuilders ye need, ye’ve found yer blokes! What ye’re after? A nice fishin’ boat, mebbe? Or summat to live in?” “We need something large and hard-wearing.” Roland answered. “For long-distance journeys- we have plans to go to Hydropolis… and beyond that, beyond the world? Who knows.”

“Huh.” Ketch tapped on his forehead. “I hate t’ disappoint ye, but the wood we have won’t cut it for ocean-goin’. Ye’ll need wood much hard-wearin’ than what ye see ‘ere or the waves’ll soon
wallop ye to pieces.” “Wood, you say…” Evan brought his hand to his chin. “Guess we’ll have to consult Niall about that. I’m sure he’ll know of something to use.” “Niall of Niall’s Forest?” Mr. Wright piped up. “Blimes, ye got quite the network already, haven’t ye, Yer Majesty? Sure, ye best go an’ ask the ol’ fella, then. We’ll be right ’ere if ye need us.”

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“Hard-wearin’ wood, yae say?” Niall stroked his beard. “Now, you can do with an ironbough tree, or ten- there’s a batch right in my forest, where they’d call it the Hard Woods.”

“Well, that solves it!” Evan cheered, “We could just ask the shipbuilders to go-” The Elder Greenling held up his hand. “Aye, hold up, laddie. We’ve kind of a mon’ problem going on there. Some kind of dirty great beastie with a fuse so short ye’d swear he didnae have one. We’ve blocked it up with thornpods to keep wanderers from stomping in ‘is territory, so ye’d need this-” He handed the young king a perfume-looking bottle. “Just a few puffs will do.”

“I’m guessing we can’t get to those ironbough trees without going through the monster.” Roland commented. “We should get going, then.” He felt the blue glow of magic gather at his feet, and in an instant, he was in the forest. The greenery looked as beautiful as ever- wait. He turned around, sensing a lack of hubbub. He’d teleported, but the others hadn’t… Oh, this was going to be embarrassing. Roland glanced around the clearing, noting something gleaming unnaturally in a hollow of one of the huge trees. Oh well.

The Chief Consul peeked into the hollow, and saw a familiar metal door. There was an opening through the wood, and he slipped through it, tapping the key against the Dreamer’s Doorl. It opened, and from it he took a second blank page. Roland took out the book cover from Mileniyah, stuck the side of the page against the spine, then willed the teleportation spell to take him back to Evermore.

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At least the other four seemed satisfied with the explanation of ‘getting the hang of magic’. Roland had landed in the throne room, to the others’ slight amusement, and after taking a quick detour to the Higgledery, the pirate duo were now accompanied by a Fire Higgledie, who’d taken to sitting on Tani’s head while they made their way through the woods. Evan had received his page from the door- a ancient tale of sorts, he described.

“Well, see here,” Lofty answered, “it just looks like we warp together because the magic’s gotta accommodate all the requests.” The creature squinted. “Cor, Look’it them spikes.”

The route in front of them were blocked by floating balls of spikes. Evan took out the bottle Niall had handed over. “And that goes there… a few puffs, Niall said…” He gently pressed onto the bulb on the bottle. A blast of dirt-green burst out of the bottle with such intensity one could think the young king had been using a fire extinguisher. When the smoke dissipated, the burrs were nowhere to be seen. Evan turned around, hair in a mess. “I-I pressed as gently as I could…” Batu guffawed and ruffled the young king’s hair, messing it up even more and receiving a mild “Hey!” from the latter.

The path led up a tree trunk and eventually to a glade. Pillars of iron-grey trees stood, surrounding a much larger, circular surface of silver as though they were artificial constructs. “That’s got to be the ironboughs.” Batu muttered. “So the fella should be close around…”

They stepped onto the gleaming surface, and at the first sound of shoes clacking on metal, a howl echoed from above. The four drew their weapons, and watched as a white gorilla-like beast pounced from the taller ironbough trees and landed in front of them, snarling angrily.
“Well… here goes.” Evan muttered. “For our ship, everyone!”

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If there was one thing that Roland learned from the fight, it was that the ironboughs were not conductors. The monster was capable of storing electricity in its fur, and when it had first discharged it, Roland had yelled for the others to get off, but no one ended up being zapped- just a smoking patch of black on the ground where it had released the shock.

The white-haired beast, Zagg as Lofty called it, wasn’t too hard of a fight, but was annoyingly athletic, bouncing on and off the tree trunks. At least it wasn’t like the Jelly Queen, where they had both hostages and lasers to handle, but it was annoying when Roland was sure a Heavy Ammo or the others’ attacks would connect, only for the beast to pounce at the last second and everyone had to get out of the way in case they get caught up in the attack.

The pile of monster dust blew away, and Tani jumped up, cheering and expressing her excitement at getting on a ship. Roland watched her and Evan chat about what they wanted their ship to look like, mind already scribbling to form an extended list to what to pack.

Was he anticipating about the trip? Maybe. Was it going to be a lot to prepare? Definitely.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 37! I'm honestly not too happy with this one, but I wanted to get through to getting the boat soon so I had to pick up the speed.

The crew'll be getting on the boat next chapter, so uh, feel free to use this chapter to guess stuff. Or something. Haha.
The construction took two weeks. They’d gone back to Evermore after confirming the ship’s blueprints, and busied themselves arranging for the better-experienced members of Evermore to take over their duties during the diplomatic journeys. That was done within a few days of negotiating and arranging assistants, so the rest of the wait was occupied with preparations of Evan’s speech as well as... luggage, as Roland had inwardly put it. Hau Ling had approached the ministers a few days prior, insisting on a ritual of safe journey due to stars warning her of incidents, so everyone had an idea the ship was nearly finished.

Evan had been discussing the benefits of enlarging the farm when a soldier ran in, pointing his lance towards the exit. They looked up, alarmed. Was there an attack?

“Hold! Hold, I tell you! I-I’ll have you arrested for disturbing the peace! And... and trespassing!” The young dogfolk yelled, as a man in blue... and a thong strolled in. Ketch waved from the entrance of the castle. “Oh.” Evan suppressed a snort. “It’s fine, Lei Ha. He’s friendly.”

“Would’ve worn some proper pants if we’d any time, kid.” Ketch huffed, passing by the slightly mortified-looking guard. “But we’re not- yer ship’s all fitted and ready to sail, Yer Majesty! Crew an’ I went for a quick test ride from Caps to t’ coast nearby yers, so all ye’ve do now is to climb aboard and start sailin’!”

Evan’s eyes lit up. “Thank you so much, Ketch!” A pause, tail swishing in excitement. “We can finally sail to Hydropolis...” “Ye’re more excited about riding a boat, aren’t ye, lad?” Batu asked, and after a bit of flustered gesturing, Evan nodded. “I-I’ve never been on a boat before, you see!” “As by the blueprint, it’s as similar in control to one o’ yer bird’bills, so sailing it’s as easy as pea, trust me.” Ketch grinned and turned to leave. “Well, with that, I’ll be goin’. Gotta get back to Caps before Wright starts fussin’ again. Cha!”

Roland crossed his arms. “Right. Have you all packed what you need? We’ll need some time to move them onto the ship, so you’d best double-check.” “What’s there to move?” Batu asked. “There’s only the clothes, dried food ‘n water, right?” “Yes. Are you going to double check?” “Aye, mate.”

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“Ginger... there. And... jerky. That seems to be it.”

Roland closed the shelves and checked for a final time that they wouldn’t shake loose. He’d managed to pour all of the assorted dried food from bags into their separate slots without making a mess, so he felt mildly proud of himself. Meanwhile, Toby played with the water purifier, a collaborative project done between the Magic Ministry and the Higglery, giggling. (Auntie Martha’s idea; she proposed that the two sorceresses try to emulate what Water Higgledies could do.)

Batu walked in with a sky pirate- Fawlon, the Cloud Snake had introduced, who would be looking after the ship while they were away- and set down a small bag on the ground. Roland regarded it with curiosity. “What’s that?” Batu harrumphed. “Gifts when we meet the queen of Hydropolis.” “Uh... and that is?” Fawlon peeked around Batu, chewing. “T’s dried meat.” Roland blinked. In all honesty, that wasn’t that bad of an idea. “Either way...” The older pirate crossed his arms. “We’re
done putting things in places ‘nd checkin’ the controls. An exact copy of the birdmobiles, if ye ask me. Just seein’ if ye’re done.” Roland stood up, and Toby casually floated over to his shoulder. “Yes.”

Following the two pirates, Roland went back up to the deck, then to the tail of it, where the two kids have been chatting away and peeking around the controls- which was a chair in front of a hub, with circular glass panels, a steering wheel and… It did look like the control panels on birdmobiles.

Lofty waved at the three as they approached. Batu nodded at Evan. “The ship’s ready, Yer Majesty.” “Thank you, Batu.” The young king breathed deeply, but his excitement was barely concealed. “Tani, you wanted to try driving the ship, right? You can be first captain.” “Yeah!” Tani sat down on the chair, grinning. “Here we go, lads!”

She stepped down on a pedal, and the fin-like appendages behind the ship sputtered and flapped. The ship moved forward slowly. Tani’s grin grew wider, and she-

The ship lurched to move forward at an improbable speed. Roland reached one hand to grab onto a railing, and the other to pull Evan in before he lost his balance. Lofty clung onto Evan’s cape, screeching, as with Bob. (Runcible had decided to stay behind, scared of feeling homesick with such a long journey.) The sea blurred into a singular blue note. *This wasn’t how a ship worked*, he found himself screaming inwardly. He looked to his left, where Batu and Fawlon were similarly clinging onto the rails.

Was it just him, or did Batu look green?

“Tani, you’re going too fast!” Evan yelled over the wind, and the pirate girl heard it. The ship lurched forward as it- *this wasn’t how a ship was supposed to work*, Roland repeated in his mind- screeched to a halt. There was a crash from below deck.

Immediately, Batu turned around and hurled painfully over the railing. Fawlon patted the Cloud Snake over the back and Tani hurried to do the same. Roland pressed his hands over Evan’s ears. When he came to think about it later, they were… surprisingly soft.

When the pirate’s stomach finally settled, Batu sat down on the deck, groaning. “That’s every single meal ever had out o’ me system…” Evan hurried over to join in on patting the pirate on the back, so Roland opted to go below deck to get the man some water.

He opened the door to reveal a completely trashed room. Only the water purifier stood dignified on a table. But the shelf was at the back of the room, right? The acceleration shouldn’t have… oh. The brake. Roland brought his hands to the sides of his head before hurrying to find a mug that hadn’t broken completely amidst the mess.

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It took a few more tries, but the ship was finally sputtering smoothly along its intended route. They would take turns driving it- and Fawlon was on duty, singing some kind of sea ditty. Roland was below deck, having written a memo on Hydropolis and was dozing off when Tani hurried into the room for a fourth time in an afternoon. He lifted his head off the desk. “Batu?” Tani nodded in reply, pouring water into the slightly chipped mug. “Is he drinking the water?” “Yeah, but it isn’t helping.” “He’s too full.” Roland stood up and walked over the shelves, taking out a chunk of ginger- or the counterpart in this world, called gurn as sold in Goldpaw- and handing it over. “Let him chew on it. The taste should settle the stomach.”

Tani squinted at the root, then at him, then at the shelf. He settled down on his chair. “Why didn’t
you tell us earlier?” She asked. “It’s going to help.” Roland replied. Tani’s eyes grew narrower, but she hurried out. He rested his forehead on the wooden construct, something tugging at him. Did he… forget something? He searched his head for an answer. He remembered that they did say chewing on ginger helped with motion sickness. That should be correct…

He leapt up, and chased after Tani. “Wait! You’re supposed to-”

Roland watched as Batu stuffed the entire piece of root in his mouth. The sunset lit the sky behind him. His throat did a somersault. Ginger roots are grown in the ground, his brain recited triumphantly, much too late.

“...skin it first…”

Roland felt Tani and Batu’s stares on him, the latter still chewing on the dirt-blessed root. What to do? That was idiotic of him to miss such an important detail. He coughed. “I’m sorry. You’re supposed to just chew the yellow part. Normally you’d powder it and add it to water, or boil it- but, uh, you’ve-”

Batu spat a wad over the railing. “It’s working.” He said. Roland blinked. “Oh.” That solves it, then, he thought. “There’s more in the shelves if you need any.” He got ready to turn around. “Wait, Roland.” “I got those from Goldpaw, if you’re curious.” “That’s not it.”

The Cloud Snake scratched the back of his head. “About the meetin’ before- I meant to apologize. Shouldn’t have said things like that.” Oh. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. You had a point about other nations being hard to convince. It should be me who should apologise for being so defensive. I’m sorry.” Roland could see Batu frown- did he say something wrong again?


It’d be his turn next. Best if he catch some shuteye.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 38! Gern is basically how ginger is pronounced in Cantonese- something like Ga-erng with a hard g.

Fear’s a funny thing: get scared of doing something for a while and you’ll just get even more scared of it.
By the third day, they were all getting bored. By the twentieth, they were very, aggravatingly bored.

The initial excitement at seeing the endless expanse of blue had been washed away both literally and metaphorically, leaving the two younger travelers with not much to witness, apart from occasional globs of goo and other monsters that had either swooped down or made their way up from the seawater. When even the larger monsters stopped being at least a bit threatening- mostly because the crew’d been able to salvage weapons from previous challengers and improve them with a bit of help from Lofty- they tried to spar on the ship. (Their first and last attempt was right in the middle of the day, and it was a sorely regretted decision.) So they all turned to one activity for relief-taking turns steering the ship.

Roland could understand why, he thought as he piloted the boat. Holding the wheel at just the right angle, keeping the accelerator at just the right strength- it took concentration, and that alone was enough to keep them occupied until the next person took over. His mood’d improved from it, honestly.

“Hey, Roland, is it my turn yet?” Tani asked for the third time, staring at the controls as if she was handling them herself. Roland carefully let go of the wheel and stood up. “Yeah, sure.” The pirate girl grinned, gave a thumbs up and jumped to take hold of the ship, whereas he went down to the deck, stretching.

Now, to find something to do.

He passed by Evan and Batu, the former doing push-ups under supervision, and went below deck, sitting at the desk. Evan’s speeches were at their ninth iteration, and he really couldn’t see what else he could add after passing it around for all to read. He pulled it out from his arms band anyway and read it over again. Nothing he could change, and he stowed it away, sighing and kneading his forehead with his hands. Toby snuggled on his shoulder, murmuring sleepily, and he patted the Higgledie on its head. Still needed something to do, though.

Roland touched the arms ring, concentrating. He brought… a squeaky hammer out of it. Raising an eyebrow, he tried again. This time, a slate grey book cover materialised on the desk. He flipped it open with an exasperated sigh, and just for the sake of passing time, read it for the umpteenth time.

Entry - 20915

My king turns twelve today- and is now of age to officially attend kingly duties. He had managed to recite his inauguration speech flawlessly, but in his attention on the speech, he was not aware of the stares the court have been giving him. It was subtle, but I could feel it. Fierce, hungry- like wolves waiting to pounce on their prey...

Or was it that they were anticipating new duties now that a king was on the throne?

Perhaps it is my worry for the young king that have caused this unusual vigilance. After all, these men have served my previous king fine. The nation have been free from coups all this time- there should be no incentive in creating one. I, for one, will make sure there isn’t.
Having almost memorized the writings word for word, Roland could figure the writer was someone similar to Aranella: governing and caretaking in one. The number of the entry still bugged him—unless the writer had been writing diaries since they were born, the entries were impossible to rack up that high. Unless it was similar to a day-month-year format…

As he pondered, a shout from Lofty above deck. “Land... ho!” Footsteps from above the ceiling, so Roland followed the sounds to the head of the ship. The five—apart from Tani, who continued manning the ship—eagerly stared into the distance, and amidst the line of blue, there was a black vertical line. Evan brought his hands to his eyes to shield them from the sunlight. “Looks like a tower…”

The ship lurched, and the line moved towards the right. The Kingmaker squinted and yelled. “Flip-vortex! 12’o! We’re bein-” “I'll go tell girlie!” Batu sprinted away, and Roland turned to pull Evan close once again. The blonde-haired boy grabbed the railings as the ship swerved around.

“Hold on tight, mun!” Lofty looked like one of those dolls with magnetic limbs hanging off the railings.

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“Aarrgh… me ‘earties…” Batu straightened up, holding onto a wooden pillar for support. “I’d thought this’d be the end o’ me…” “And it’d be the end of you if I hadn’t whipped the boat out of there, pops.” Tani struck her hand on Batu’s back and handed him a piece of gern. “Blimey, you’re right worrying with that seasickness of yours.”

Roland looked around while Batu coughed again, cursing under his breath. Evan had gone on to search for a spot to set down their teleportation magic. So this was Hydropolis, huh… stone buildings with fading paint lined the streets, with shrubbery growing on top of some. A merfolk with blue skin and fins for ears stared at them from the adjacent row of wooden walkways. The Chief Consul looked up, eyes immediately drawn to… uh. What in the flipping hell was that eye… tower... thing?

A slim pillar of purple, topped by a uncanny pink eye. It was staring at the port, as though watching them… and blinked. Roland jumped backwards and shouted in alarm. “What's the matter?” Batu yelled back, while the Chief Consul watched the eye look away. “Holy…’’ Roland pursed his lips and pointed at the tower. “Look at that.” A few moments later, he could hear Batu sputter as the eye looked at them again, blinking twice. ‘Wh- shit, that’s horrifyin’.

Evan walked down the square, flanked by two mermen in armor. “That’s all of the visitors, yes?” One of them asked, and the younger boy nodded nervously. “Y-yes.” “Yoy…” Lofty muttered. “We aren’t getting shunted off the first minute we step on land, are we?” The Hydropolitans stood in front of them while Evan hurried to rejoin the group. If the conversation was to be confrontational, it was best to take the initiative.

“Is anything the matter?” Roland asked. “Well, not really-” The guard on the left began, but the one of the right shushed him before regarding the group. “All foreign visitors to Hydropolis must undergo questioning before being permitted entry. Specifically, your intentions on coming here. Are you tourists? Traders?” “We’ve traveled here from Evermore, a new country in the Heartlands. We’d like to request an audience with Queen Nerea.”

The guard on the right— the higher-ranked of the two, Roland guessed— huffed. “I’ve heard of no such nation. And Her Majesty offers audiences to no one.” “B-but you’re welcome to do a bit of sightseeing!” The other guard added, at which he was again shushed by a harsh ‘Cetichthys’.”
two guards stood straight again. “The next thing you must do is to swear by the four pillars of law!”

Cetichthys coughed. “Pillar One! It is strictly forbidden to harm one’s fellow man!” Sounds fair. “Pillar Two! It is strictly forbidden to ascend to any high places of Hydropolis!” Alright... “Pillar Three! Sickness is strictly forbidden!” Cetichthys clenched his fists as he announced the last law. “And Pillar Four, the last and most important one! Love is absolutely, completely forbidden under any circumstances!”

“Wait, wait, wait, hold up.” Roland raised a hand. “Love? What…” “Yes!” The young guard answered with enthusiasm. “There is no greater crime than love- so as guests, we do hope you will remember them. I wouldn’t want to end up in jail during a trip if I were you!” A pause. “Well, I’ll assume you don’t object to them?” “Uh, no…” “That’ll be all then!”

As the two guards left- Cetichthys being reprimanded on being too friendly and responding with a very loud ‘Yes Sir!’- Batu spat a wad into the waters nearby. “Peh, so much for bringin’ along a few gifts for the ol’ queenie. Wager she’s as warm as our welcome.” “I’m guessing they mean public showings of affection by love…” Evan said, hand on chin. “But why is that?” Lofty jumped to get everyone’s attention. “Oi, but our treaty needs us, so we gotta see the queen, yeah?”

Apart from Queen Nerea’s name and that she didn’t welcome audiences, there wasn’t really a lot to fall back on. Roland crossed his arms. “We don’t know a whole lot about her quite yet. How does info gathering sound?” “Sounds good to me.” Tani replied, “We gonna split up?” “I think that’s the most efficient, yes.”

Evan gave a nod of agreement. “Then we’ll meet up back at the ship when we’re done. I’m sure there’s someone that can help us.”

Chapter End Notes

And we finally get to update their weapons and whatnot. Good grief.

Thank you for reading chapter 39! The first thing I did on the boat was to ride along all the outer edges, basically going everywhere but Hydropolis- I'll post my voyage over on my personal tumblr, haha. And we've hit 60k words! I genuinely don't know how long this is going to be at this point, haha.

According to wikipedia Cetichthys is a genus of flabby whalefishes. They look pretty flabby alright.
Roland stood in the square, looking around. The rest of the group suggested that they go find other landmarks of Hydropolis, where people were certain to gather, so he was more or less in charge of gathering information from the port. A few more seconds of looking, and the guard waved energetically—should be the same guard that introduced them to Hydropolis. Well, he seemed friendly. Roland walked over, remembering the guard’s name.

“Cetichthys, I’m guessing?” Roland asked, and the guard grinned, “You’ve got quite some ears, mister tourist! That’s me. Is there anything I can help with?” “What are you doing?” “Oh, just guarding the staircase over here.” Cetichthys gestured behind him. “You remember Pillar Two right? Can’t have anyone go to high places. Although…” The guard slumped a bit. “I sincerely wish I can sneak up there… The view is spectacular from this podium I’m assigned to…”

Hm. “You mean Pillar Two wasn’t set until recently?” The young guard tapped his helmet. “Well, yes! It was probably a month or two ago, when someone fell while, uh… Well, they were arguing about something in the bar, I heard. Nasty fall. Archon Leander quickly made Pillar Two and another law regarding no arguments in response to the incident, so hopefully we won’t be seeing any more hurt people any time soon.”

“Archon Leander?” Roland inquired. “I thought Queen Nerea was, well, the highest leader in Hydropolis.” “That’s true, but Archon Leander’s the one who’s running around catching criminals, announcing things and whatnot. Subordinate, I guess?” The guard tapped his helmet. “Now that I think of it… Not even us guards have been see-”

“Cetichthys?” A guard had walked into view. “What are you doing?” “Ah-” The young merfolk began, but Roland held up his arm. “Just asking directions, sir. I’ve never been here before.” The guard nodded. “Fine. Just don’t try breaking any laws, you hear?” “Yeah, thank you.”

Once the other guard had disappeared around the corner of the square, Cetichthys let out of a breath. “Oh, thank you, mister tourist! I was sure I was going to be scolded again.” He chuckled. “But yes, Her Majesty has seldom been seen in public. You’ll probably have a better chance seeing Archon Leander on patrol than having an audience with Her Majesty, I’m afraid.”

“I see.” That was surprisingly useful information. “Well, I’ll take a walk around. Can’t have your superiors say you’re not being helpful. See you later.” “Haha- please enjoy your visit to Hydropolis!”

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As he continued pacing between the rows of buildings, Roland could feel a tug of unease at him while he sorted out the information he had. Four pillars of law, and violators would be shunted off to jail. The leader of Hydropolis was secluded, with a separate person handling matters of the kingdom.

So there were two problems: how to achieve an audience and how to convince both people of power. Two problems… Roland closed his eyes, kneading his forehead. His head still swayed groggily from the near-month of being at sea. His legs brought him back to the square, and to his surprise, the others have already gathered in a small circle, engaged in conversation.
Evan looked up and smiled as Roland approached. “Ah! You’re back, Roland. Did you find anything?” “Yes- not a lot on Queen Nerea, unfortunately, but I’ve been hearing about this… Leander character. He carries out the law and does patrols, apparently- sounds pretty overworked.” “Oh, him.” Tani crossed her arms. “The arch guy? People’s saying he’s some kind of see-all guy, and the one who’s running Hydropolis instead of Nerea.” At that, Evan brought his hand to his chin. “Well, hear this- the Hydropolitans ain’t too happy w’ all these pillars and whatnot.” Batu added. “Apparently before the queen laid down the no love law, this place was known to be a proposal hotspot- with a ring special to Hydropolis.” “Do you know when Queen Nerea set down the fourth pillar, Batu?” Roland asked, at which Batu scratched his head. “Recent enough for the people to mutter complaints a’it, as far as I know. Ye got anything, Evan?”

“Oh… Oh, yes.” Evan replied. “The eye on the tower can see through walls and warn guards of any criminal activity- it’s also an extension of the Hydropolitan castle. The castle’s right at the sea bed, with a teleporting platform to get there. And people have been saying that the prisoners are taken there…” The young boy pondered for a while more before dropping his voice to a whisper. “What if…”

There was some kind of siren blaring in Roland’s mind, but before he could say anything, Lofty had jumped up. “Aha! That’s a plenty good idea, mun!” The Kingmaker grinned maliciously. “In fact, let’s get us one o’ them thingumibobs first, yeah?” The siren was getting louder. “Thingum… bobs?” Roland asked, and Lofty pointed both hands at him. “Yeah, exactly! Reckon we’ll get one at the accessory store! Come on!”

“Uh… mister?” “Oh, welcome! Is there anything you’d like to buy?” “Well, uh, do you happen to sell any bright red coral rings, do you?”

The shopkeeper jumped back at Evan’s question. “Wh- but what do you need with, uh, such a thing?” “Never you mind, sunshine!” Lofty chipped in, jumping, “Do you have it or not?” “Well, you see… yes, as a matter of fact.” The older man crossed his arms. “But the law forbids me to sell such an item. I dread to think how Archon Leander would react if he were to learn of such a flagrant breach of law.”

Evan raised his hand. “Can we borrow it?” “Huh! That’s a strange thought coming from you, lad.” The Hydropolitan pondered. “That being said… there’s no law that prevents me from doing that… or just giving you one. I’ve been hoping to get my hands off one of those to begin with.” The shopkeeper went to the back of the store and after a bit of searching, came out with a small box to hand to Evan. “Now, all I ask of you is that you inform no one of its provenance. And in the name of the gods, don’t let the guards see you wear it!” Lofty swabbed it from Evan’s hands and peeked into it. “Aye, that’s some pretty! Ta, mate!”

The group headed back down to the square, and Lofty turned to Roland. “Next up! You gotta take them kids to one o’ those fashion stores and nab them clothes for the occasion!” What occasion, Roland was ready to ask, but the gears in his mind was finally beginning to creak and turn. A ring that violated Hydropolitan laws… a proposal hotspot… oh. Oh. Meanwhile, Batu was objecting to Lofty. “Oi! Why not me?” “I don’t trust your fashion instincts, pops!” Lofty answered. “I gotta make a script and we need it to be convincing, en’t it?” “Arr- I’m comin’ along!” The Cloud Snake insisted. “I know where the store is, anyway.”

Tani turned to Evan, mouth curled up in a smug smile. “Yeah, pops knows where it is. Caught me staring at the shop, ha.” Evan glanced at Batu, who looked horrified at being snitched, and stifled a giggle.
Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, this is gonna be fun. Evan's learning, everyone!

Thank you for reading Chapter 40! We're at 40 chapters now! And this fic has gotten to 50 kudos, so thank you very much!

I've kind of imagined Cetichthys as a really enthusiastic and/or overly trusting greenhorn person.
Roland pushed open the door, letting the rest of the group walk into the store. The walls was the same faded paint, with rows of clothes on hangers and a few wooden cubicles in the back. The merfolk looked up from his counter, yawning. “Ah… welcome.” He blinked. “You don’t look like you’re Hydropolitan. Here to buy clothes, I guess.” Waving his hand, he dunked his head back onto the counter. “Take your time.” Lofty ran to jump on a crate, bringing out a feather pen and piece of scroll out of nowhere.

Batu looked around the store, whistling. “Blimey, that’s a lot. Where do we begin?” Roland let his eyes swipe over the rows. It seemed to be sorted in terms of size, with the smallest nearest to the changing cubicles. “Over here.” He walked to the clothes, and on further inspection, saw that they were sorted into dresses and… not dresses. There were more cabinets on the side of the wall, Roland noted, marked by a lazily written sign of ‘shoes’.

“Tani?” Roland asked. “Yeah?” “Pick a color.” The pirate girl tilted her head, thinking. “Pink?” “Batu, I’ll let you handle that.” “Ar… Arr, lad.” As the Cloud Snake began rifling through the clothes, Roland turned to Evan, who was watching curiously, lowering his voice so the shopkeeper wouldn’t hear. “Now, for something like a formal proposal, we’d most likely need something light-colored- white, since you’ll be the one doing it. Are you fine with it?” “Yeah.” Evan nodded. “Alright.”

Finding the set of white suit jacket and trousers were easy enough. He took them out and glanced between them and Evan, then knelt as he measured the clothes against the younger boy. It should fit, so he handed both to Evan to hold while he looked for the rest of the components of a suit.

“Aye, ye’re a darned natural, Roland.” Batu muttered, holding a pink dress in each hand as the other man found a blue bowtie. “Ye picked clothes for kids before?”

He had, Roland thought, for his son- his hand stopped short of a white shirt, mind fizzling static. Not here. He couldn’t let it show. Steady, steady. He took the shirt off the row, and pretended to blink, giving the best answer for such a situation. “I’d take the one on the right if I were you.” Tani skipped forward to take a look at each, and with that conversation ended, Roland hurried to turn his thoughts back towards clothes.

There was only one vest- a pink one with a star, much too small, but Roland supposed it had to do. Evan’s shoes and socks didn’t need to be changed- not that people would notice it from lower levels. He retrieved the jacket and trousers from Evan, made a request for the boy to wait there and walked up to the counter. “Do you have these?” The shopkeeper looked up, then nodded, taking the clothes and walking to through a back door. Roland took the chance to knead between his eyebrows, imagining himself pushing the static away.

“Bad day?” The shopkeeper quipped, returning with the set of clothes, now in a sackcloth bag. Roland smiled as he paid. “Nah.” Batu placed a pink dress with blue decorations on the counter, so Roland took the bag off of it and walked back to Evan, who regarded it with interest. “Go change in the cubicles over there.” The older man said, handing the clothes to Evan. The wooden cubicle swung shut, and Roland crossed his arms, tapping. Next to him, Batu handed a dress to Tani, and she jogged off to change in the adjacent cubicle.

“Ey, here!” Tani piped up, stepping next to Evan in her pink dress, golden accessories and white elbow-length gloves. Roland looked up from adjusting Evan’s bowtie and nodded in affirmation. “Not bad. Not bad at all.” Lofty jumped down from his crate, scroll trailing after him. “Alrighty! Yer to call me Mister Director Sir from now on!” He handed the scroll to the two kids and pulled out a miniature cone, a fake beard, and… sunglasses? “Evan, Tani, you’re to memorise the script, yeah?” “What about us?” Batu asked. “Well… You’re to find a high place. Gotta strike as many pillars of law as we can find, yeah?”

Roland remembered Cetichthys. “I think I’ve got it.”

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“Oh! Hello! Fancy seeing you again!” Cetichthys’ greeting was as enthusiastic as ever. “Looking spiffing, little tourists!” “Thank you.” Evan nodded. “Well, uh, I know it’s a violation of the laws, but… can we go up to that podium?” The young guard jolted, then leaned as he whispered agitatedly, “You know it breaks the law! Why do you ask?” “We just want to go up there for a quick look at Hydropolis from higher places- we won’t try to jump on the ledges or anything.”

Cetichthys pouted as he thought. “You haven’t been here before, right?” “Mm-hm. I don’t know if we’ll get to come back.” “I, hm…” The guard shrugged and stepped aside. “I guess you tourists would’ve wasted your long journey here if you don’t get to see Hydropolis in all its glory… Just please, try to keep your head down and make it quick, yes?” “Thank you!” The guard looked around the square nervously- the people were mostly doing their own thing. “Hurry, then! I don’t want any of the other guards seeing you sneak up there!”

Once they made their way up to the podium, Tani walked to the front of it- thankfully, no one noticed just yet. Roland carefully pushed a crate to in front of the entrance, and Batu caught on. “A barricade, eh?” The latter chuckled, then hoisted another box to quietly stack it over the first. Roland nodded, smiling in amusement. “Something like that.”

“Alright!” Lofty jumped onto the railing of the balcony, donning some kind of beard and… sunglasses? The two men turned to watch. Evan jolted, but stepped forward in preparation. The little Kingmaker pulled out a cone, speaking into it. “Wedding scene, act 1! And…” He spun dramatically, then pointed the cone forward. “ACTION!”

Evan nodded, then began walking stiffly towards Tani, swinging his arms and legs in wide arcs. They could hear murmuring from below. Roland grinned as the younger boy stomped to a halt and cleared his throat. “Ahem! Tani…” The pirate girl turned around on her heels, giving a smile. “Yes, Evan?” The younger boy sighed. “I… uh…” “You can do it, Evan!” Tani encouraged him. “It’s just make-believe, remember?” “I know! I… Of course. Ahem…” The young king steeled himself, then spoke loudly. “I can bear it no longer… I, um, care not a jot if love be forbidden! My feelings cannot be… tamed… I must scream it from the rooftops!”

The half-Grimalkin brought out the small box and knelt on one knee. “Will you…” He opened it, “Will you marry me?” The Hydropolitans below yelled in alarm. “Is that… the Rite of the Ring?” “A marriage proposal? In broad daylight?!”

“What are you doing up there?” A shout from below the stairs- Cetichthys had finally realised his betrayal and was hurrying up to arrest them. “I’m really sorry, Cetichthys!” Roland yelled, then
pushed the crates off, sending them tumbling down the stairs. An alarmed shout, and that was three of the pillars broken, he thought. Fun.

“Focus, Tani!” He heard Lofty yell behind him. “Time for youer close-up! Take the ring, big smile-” More guards were streaming up the stairs, and as the first one pushed past Roland, Lofty yelled, “NOW!”

“I… acce… ah…” Tani scrunched up her face, then- “ACHOO!”

Aha.

"You…” The guards were appropriately flabbergasted. “You’re all arrested! You’re arrested for the crime of public affection! And then some! Her Majesty has seen the entire sorry affair, so do not try to deny it!”

“And cut!” Roland heard Lofty cackle to himself as they were led off by the guards, still wearing the sunglasses. Where did it come from? Roland had no idea.

Chapter End Notes

And the fun part's already over. Bummer.

Thank you for reading Chapter 41! I've always thought the pink vest to stick out like a sore thumb, haha.
“I wonder how this translates to Evermore’s reputation…” Evan muttered, pacing around the jail cell they were in. “I mean, Lofty’s plan worked out, but… Will we be able to meet the Archon as we hoped?”

A voice came from behind them, outside the prison bars. “And what business do you have with the Archon?” They turned around to see a man with lemon-yellow hair, in a purple overcoat and glasses. He pushed his glasses up before speaking, looking exasperated. “Breaking all four pillars at once…” A sigh. “You were intentionally pushing Hydropolis’s limits, I suppose.”

“Are you Leander? Archon Leander?” Evan asked, and the man nodded. “I am.” The young king turned to cheer quietly to Lofty. “Yes! We got to meet him!” Leander raised his eyebrows. “My apologies, Archon.” Roland spoke. “We were forced to use… a little artifice to gain your attention.” “Little may be understating it. But why go to such lengths? Who are you?”

Evan looked up. “I am Evan Pettwhisker Tildrum; king of Evermore. I’ve come to ask you to sign a treaty, Archon Leander.” “If it is an union you speak of, I must refuse.” Leander replied curtly. Batu gave a yelp of shock. “Oi! Just like that? Not e’en considerin’ it?” The Archon pushed his glasses up again. “If it were up to me, yes. But Her Majesty has ordered that you be brought before her.”

Leander snapped his fingers, and the prison doors swung open. The four exchanged surprised glances before stepping outside of the cell. “Ah, Archon Leander?” Evan asked. “Yes?” The young king pointed at himself, then at Tani- still in the white suit and pink dress respectively. “Is it possible to find a room to change? I’m afraid these are not appropriate to meet the queen with.” “…fair enough. Follow me.”

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The throne room was luxuriously decorated- blue glass fins stretched out from where Queen Nerea sat- blue hair, aqua dress and an overall cold atmosphere was what Roland could assess. More glass structures formed the ceiling, and despite the fact they were at the sea floor, the place was well illuminated.

“Queen Nerea-” Evan began, but the queen held up her hand. “There is no need to go into tiresome explanations. All has been shown to me: you wish me to sign this treaty of yours, correct?” “I advise against it, Your Majesty.” Leander objected. “To enter a union would be-” “Silence, Leander.” Queen Nerea cupped her face with her hand, inspecting Evan with mild intrigue. “I have but one condition: there is a labyrinth near here. Within it dwells a large sea creature, named Cetus. Defeat the creature and return here unharmed, and I will sign your treaty.”

“B-” Leander began to speak but was interrupted by Evan with an excited ‘really?’. Nerea nodded, giving a sly smile. “Really. And Leander will accompany you.” The Archon struggled to find his words for a while, then pushed his glasses up. “I… of course, Your Majesty.”

“Very well.” Nerea leaned back. “I wish you godspeed, King Evan.”

“My apologies- I have not introduced myself properly.” Leander said once they had exited the
throne room. “I am Leander Aristides, Archon of Hydropolis.” He bowed. “I will accompany you to
the labyrinth as Her Majesty wishes. It is south-west of here, accessed by boat. I trust you should
have no-.”

his arms. “Ah, I see. I am well-trained in the arts of magic, so I should be of assistance.” The
Kingmaker squinted, and the Archon returned the squint. “Tani, you got some lances better than a
soldier’s one?” Tani blinked at Lofty’s question, but nodded. “Yeah…?” “Toss ‘em to glass boy o’er
here, will ya? And gi’im one of your wands too, Evan.” “Okay!”

“What? There is no need of such a matter.” Leander insisted. “The weapons I have are of top
quality among Hydrop-” Evan held out a wand, and the Archon stopped, inspecting it with raised
eyebrows. “You gotta settle for better, mun.” Lofty commented. “Ol’ queeny wants us to return
unharmed- and that includes you.” “I…” Leander pushed up his glasses again- probably a tic- before
taking the wand and putting it away in his arms band. “…appreciate the act of kindness. I’ll be sure to
return them when our business with Cetus is done.” “Aye, don’t.” Lofty answered as three lances
were dumped into the Hydropolitan’s arms- one nearly tumbled onto the floor. “We’ve been
practically drowning in weapons and all that jazz since our lil’ voyage. Think of it as a friendly gift,
yeah?”

“I- ahem. I see.” The lances disappeared in a flash of light. “I shall make good use of it.”

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“They are leaving the port.” Nerea commented, leaning back on her throne and sighing.

“Then you have no need to worry for him any longer, Your Majesty.”

The snake-headed man appeared in a plume of dark smoke, and bowed in greeting. “Are you
having second thoughts, may I ask?”

“No… no. It just hurts me to act like that towards him all this time. To part ways with him thinking
me as a cold, callous queen…”

“It is necessary, Queen Nerea.” Naverre replied. “You want him to live with nothing holding his
heart back, yes?” A pause. “You are saving him. You are saving everyone… and you are saving
yourself. From love.”

Queen Nerea stared at the sorcerer, who continued, “Love hurts when you already know the pain
of its loss. Romantic love… Platonic love…” His voice grew quieter, lighter. “A love for your
nation… Familial love.” He summoned a sword with a yellow blade into his hand, inspecting it
solemnly. “I… can understand how you feel. I have lost someone I treasured, after all.” “You…”

The snake-headed man turned back to Nerea. “So why not put an end to this mess? You are tired.
This has gone on for too long. You know your actions have been futile all this time. Won’t you be
happy to know you at least have saved your loved one from his fate and your people from theirs?”

The queen stared at the floor. Naverre walked closer. “You have to act quickly, Your Majesty. He
doesn’t know anything- yet. What if he does?” A flare of black aura enveloped the queen. “I… Very
well. We will leave after three days. It is best that we do not alarm the people with both Hydropolis’
leaders leaving in such short notice.” “A wise choice, Your Majesty.”

---

Evan was quick to take note of Leander’s concern after the ship had set sail. “Is anything the matter,
Archon Leander?” The young king asked. “Are you worried about Hydropolis? I heard you’re in charge of apprehending people.” “Yes, I must say.” Leander fiddled with his glasses. “Upkeeping of laws aside, I doubt if I understand Nerea’s decision… “ He coughed. “I do not hope to sound disrespectful of your treaty, but I am afraid Hydropolis will not be of much help to your union.” “I’m sure it will, Archon Leander.” Evan smiled. “We’ll see what we can do.”

“Right…” Leander looked thoughtful. “We’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 42! this might be a bit shorter than the others since I wanted to pace events.

Dumping weapons on Leander is from my own playthrough of NNK2: by the time I got to Hydropolis the four were indeed drowning in weapons, so the first thing I did when Leander joined was to throw equipment at him. I’m also headcanoning Lofty can analyse what someone has equipped, heh.
Doubt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the third night, Roland, being on night watch (he hadn’t been sleeping well, after all), noticed Leander walking on board. “Good evening, Archon.” He greeted, “Nice to see a fellow light sleeper.” The Archon squinted in confusion- must be because it was clearly past midnight- but returned the greeting with a ‘Good evening’ before walking to the railings.

Leander hummed and kneeled, reaching his hand down over the boat. A few moments later, he stood up, a Water Higgledie hanging off his hand. The blue spirit quickly floated up in front of Leander, who nodded. “Hello, Leucothea.” The Higgledie tilted its head and a book encapsulated in a bubble of water rose from the water to float in front of the Archon. Leander shook his head. “No, it hasn’t happened… yet.” He reached out to take the book, and the bubble dissipated into a drip of water. “But I’ll take it for now. Thank you.”

Roland took a step forward, and suddenly he was unable to breathe. He yelped. He could barely hear himself and an air bubble rose before him- he was… his head was enveloped in water. His eyes stung, but as he struggled to look, Leander was gesturing agitatedly at the Higgledie, then Roland was kneeling on the floor, sputtering and dripping water.

“I should apologise on behalf of Cothea, but you should also know it’s rude to eavesdrop.” The Archon sighed and reached out a hand. “I- peh! Didn’t mean to.” Roland took the hand and with a bit of help, stood up. “Sorry about that. You can talk to Higgledies?” “Not exactly, but we understand each other.” Leander pushed up his glasses. “It takes a long time.” An awkward silence. “Well, uh…” Roland reached his arms back to wring a bit of water out of his hair. “I’ll go keep a watch out for any monsters.” The Chief Consul turned around, but he could sense that he was being watched. Yeah, it was best that he not bring up the book, despite the itching curiosity.

“You don’t seem to use magic very often when you fight.” Leander suddenly commented, and Roland turned to look at him in confusion. “I don’t. What do you mean?” “Being trained to be a mage, I can sense magic and similar occurrences better than most. You have a disproportionately large potency- and that’s concentrated on one spot.” Leander crossed his arms and pushed his glasses, watching the other closely. “What about it?” Roland narrowed his eyes.

A few tense seconds, and Leander straightened up. “It’s your hand, isn’t it?” Roland blinked, static filling his mind as though someone had conked him on the head. Come on, do something- he found himself snorting a laugh. “Guess the cat’s out of the bag.” The sense of mirth bubbled away just as quickly, exhaustion taking its place. Roland sighed and lowered his head. “You’re not trying to blackmail me, are you?” “I swear on my loyalty to Hydropolis that I am not. A curse, I presume?” Could the Hydropolitan know something about his condition? Guess it wouldn’t hurt to give a few details. “I’m not sure. It started… a few months ago.” “May I have a look? I’ll see if I know about it.”

He wasn’t sure about that either- on one hand, Leander might have information, on the other… “I do hope you won’t tell Evan and the others.” This prompted Leander to raise his eyebrows. “I guessed you would be the type to have something to hide. Very well. I will keep this a secret, provided that they do not ask me directly.” Roland nodded, and Leander held his hand out. “Now, I’d like to take a look.”

Here goes, Roland thought as he tugged the leather glove off, revealing… well, his hand was hard
to see in the dark. The Archon pulled out his wand and once the wand lit up, hissed. “How far does it go?” Roland rolled up his sleeve in demonstration, where the mass met skin in a border of dimly glowing purple. It didn’t seem like it had spread from the last time he checked. “Got anything, Archon?” “I can determine that it’s a kind of corruption.” Leander pushed up his glasses, Cothea joining in to inspect. “It’s very strong, and… familiar, somehow, but…”

Seeing no further response, Roland nodded. “Fair enough, I guess.” “My apologies. Do you know anything about it?” Telling Leander that it might be a Kingmaker overloading his physical body would alarm the man, most likely. Roland shrugged. “Only that if it spreads, it’s going to kill me.”

Leander took a step back, flabbergasted. “You’re- excuse me!” He pushed his glasses up forcefully. “Death is nothing to shrug about! You speak of this matter like it is a mere annoyance!” Roland put the glove back on. “Well, I’ve learnt of it since a while ago. I’ve accepted my fate.” The blonde-haired man stared, then groaned in frustration, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I am aware that I am in no condition to comment on other nations’ matters, but do the other leaders of Evermore think like that too?” Roland presented a smile in answer. “I’m sure it’s just me.”

It was easy to smile, but as he cupped his corrupted hand with the other, he couldn’t keep it up. Indeed, he was sure Evan and the others wouldn’t- would never think as fatalistic as he had; but had he indeed accepted his fate of… of joining his family?

He wasn’t sure. He should’ve, a part of his mind whispered, and he quickly did another smile. “Well, thank you, Leander.” “Don’t, please. I wasn’t of much help.” Leander put his glasses on again and briefly looked thoughtful. “I guess I should see if I can snooze for a while longer.” Roland gestured around him. “The deck’s always welcome, Leander.”

The resting cabin’s door closed, and Roland waited before walking over to the railings and resting his forehead on it, coldness spreading through. He ran his fingers through his hair- still wet- and exhaled slowly. He had to stop letting things get a rise out of him; it has been the case lately. He was the Chief Consul- he had an entire nation to help sort out. He had to help Evan… Finding replacements. His mind taunted. The railings lost its coolness- it burned behind his eyes. Static buzzed in his ears. Pretending helping a boy and a nation would redeem yourself. “I am not.” He found himself whispering to block out his thoughts. “I’d never. Evan isn’t…” You know how selfish this is.

His heart thundered. Roland straightened and paced around the deck. He had to stop. Snarls behind him notified him that wyverns had picked this vessel to terrorise. “Right on time.” He greeted, taking out his sword. A smirk as he prepared for battle. “You’ve gotten on the wrong boat.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 43! This one's a bit of laying down things for later, so I hope y'all won't mind the delay in plot events. There's quite a few things to patch up on in this arc, if anything.

Now that I've progressed further on this fic I've found Roland has this habit that he'd stubbornly keep stuff a secret until someone points it out and he just. Gives up immediately. Well, not that he can hide it any longer, but it's a thing.
“Good day, everyone.” Leander pushed his glasses up as he spoke on the fourth day of their journey. “As we shall soon be approaching where the labyrinth is, I shall begin the briefing as on what you should prepare yourselves for.”

The other four sat around the table in the cabin as the Hydropolitan took out a map- a close-up of the south-eastern portion. He pointed to the corner, where the patch of land was painted in violet and strokes of grey. “Cetus’ nest lies beyond these ruins. We will need to travel through them to get to our target- and that is where the largest challenge lies, unfortunately.”

“Monsters?” Evan suggested, and Leander shook his head. “Not quite. These ruins are inhabited by spirit troops- in very large numbers, in fact.” “Ghosts?” Tani sputtered. “You mean… we have to fight ghosts?” “I would advise against that.” The Archon pushed his glasses up. “With our numbers, I doubt that we have much of a chance against them- and assigning an army would be unwise, since we are trying for efficiency. I suppose… the only way to do it is to walk past them.”

“But won’t those haunts turn on us?” Batu muttered, scratching his head. “These spirits suffered from a terrible fate.” Leander crossed his arms. “They are trapped in grief and regret. Their interaction with this world is merely… responsive. If we do not show aggression, I believe they will leave us alone. Except…” He rested his index finger on his glasses. “They will also be just as likely to try and draw the living into the same turmoil as them.”

“So we walk past them and try not to scream, is that right?” Roland quipped. The tense atmosphere in the room seemed to lighten up just a tad. Evan kept back a smile whereas Leander narrowed his eyes at the dark-haired man in exasperation. “I would not put it as lightly as that, but… yes.” The boat sputtered to a halt. Fawlon peeked into the cabin, looking pale. “We’re, uh… about to hit land. Just letting you know.” Leander nodded and followed the self-appointed captain out onto deck, and the four did the same.

The sky and the land before them were tinted an ominous purple. Plumes of lilac flames rose from the ground to form fog. Once Roland had a better look, he noticed vague shapes moving among the mist. Tani raised her hand to her forehead to look, and grimaced. “That’s… a lot of ghosts.” Batu grunted in agreement. “Ye can stay back if ye’re spooked, girlie.” “I am not.” The pirate girl watched as the shore moved closer. “I’ll go with you, pops.”

The ship hit the land with a clunk, and Fawlon lowered the anchor. Leander uttered a word of thanks to the pirate, and adjusted his coat. “I’ll stay in the back. If anything happens, I can still cast warding magic. Remember: don’t act aggressive. Let’s go.”

The moment Leander stepped on land, the figures in the mist turned slowly around to stare at the intruders. The Hydropolitan nodded gently at the other four. Roland looked at Evan, and they stepped off the boat, soon followed by the pirate duo.

As they moved further into the island, the spirits began to move closer to them, faintly whispering. Tani squeaked behind them, and Batu muttered something. A shuffling sound. Roland looked back as he walked, and the two pirates had stood close. Tani carefully gave him a thumbs up. He looked further. Leander was walking, but… Strange. The majority of the ghosts- with similar gear, no less- seemed to gather around him, mouthing words and reaching out. Cothea circled around Leander,
repelling the misty figures briefly. He watched one of the spirits as it whispered.

"You have to save her", he deciphered. What did that-

A tug on his sleeve brought Roland’s attention back. Evan cowered as a ghost seemed to stoop and speak to him- ‘avenge me’. Roland took the younger boy’s hand and gently pulled him closer. They have been walking for a while now- it almost looked as though they were wading through water, the mist thickening at their feet. Roland was about to question inwardly why the ghosts seemed to ignore him, then he saw. Two figures in the distance, looking at him. A woman and a child, huddling together. They looked like… No.

No.

The woman stooped and placed her hands on the child’s shoulders, and soon she faded into the fog, leaving the child behind to stare at him. No-

“Why did you leave?” A gentle voice, all too familiar, whispered next to his ear, and time slowed to a halt. Lissa. He had to explain- it was his- a arm draped across his shoulder cover his mouth. “Shh. There is no need to explain. I know you abandoned us.” His wife hushed him. But he had to- his eyes burnt, and her other hand covered his eyes. “Oh, my dear, dear, dearest one.” Lissa spoke.

“There is no need to cry, my darling.” Her hands began to melt. Black tar slowly oozed down his face- it burnt. “You are not allowed to cry.” Her voice distorted, thick and gurgling. “You should be dead, like us.” The heavy feeling slipped off his shoulders, dripping down. “Corpses don’t cry.”

A sensation of squeezing on his left hand, and he was looking through white fog once more. His heart beat- steady, steady… he slowly put his hand on his mouth, exhaling slowly. “Roland…?”

Evan whispered next to him. He squeezed the younger boy’s hand and nodded in reply. Nothing had happened, just needed to keep walking. And ignore the stare.

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The fog dissipated completely near a plaza of ruins- stone buildings stood half-crumbled. The five stepped onto eroded rock, and Leander hummed. “This should be the place. Cetus lies just beyond here.” No one said anything for a while.

“Do you think we should rest for a while?” Evan proposed. “It’s getting dark.” They looked up: the sky was now dark indigo. Batu whistled. “Cor, did we spend that much time in that hellhole?” “It was well past noon when we arrived.” Leander replied. “Fighting in the dark would not fare well for us- we shall stay the night.”

They could find a structure with a semi-intact roof, and with some help from Batu’s Higgledie-Kettle, as the Cloud Snake had named, smoke rose up through the hole in the ceiling. After a brief meal of dried foods, they brought out blankets (Tani’s idea to keep them in the arms band; she joked that on retrospect they should’ve brought along tents) and settled down. It didn’t take long for the others to fall asleep, Roland noted as he stared at the ceiling.

The fire continued to crackle quietly. It was completely dark outside now, and when Roland pushed himself up, Evan mumbled something in his sleep. “Aranella…” His chest clenched, and he moved over, careful not to wake the boy. The ghosts preyed on regrets, so… Roland reached out a hand to stroke the boy’s hair.

He felt a stare on his back before he could. Turning around revealed nothing. Tani and Batu snoozed next to each other further down the rows of blankets. Kettle kept the embers going. Leander had left the house some time ago. Roland returned his gaze to Evan. The young king had turned
away, curled up. Roland didn’t feel like staying, and his legs brought him outside.

Roland found the Hydropolitan standing at where clear air met mist, back turned. Cothea held his wand as it illuminated the surroundings. Leander had his head bowed, muttering something as Roland approached—only for the dark-haired man to yelp as an orb of water hit him square in the face. As he shook water out of his eyes, Leander turned around and crossed his arms. “...haven’t I warned you not to eavesdrop?”

He had gotten ready to joke, but when he saw Leander’s expression, Roland stopped in his tracks. The illumination from the wand cast shadows on the other’s face, and with it… Leander looked tired. Solemn. Old, even, but that might just be the lighting.


A few moments passed, and Leander was narrowing his eyes again. “Tomorrow will be a tough battle. You should get some rest.” “Can’t sleep.” “I can cast a sleep spell if you need it.” This prompted Roland to snort. “I never thought you’d be the type to joke. Fine, I’ll leave you alone.”

He had a feeling that the Archon saw right through him as he turned around.

Chapter End Notes

And here we are. Thank you for reading Chapter 44, the chapter that 1. took me entire three days to write because it was exhausting as heck, 2. probably just turned an adventure fic into some kind of horror fic and 3. will require a heckton of new tags to slap on the warning corner. Oof. You’re entirely welcome to yell at me because I’ve been yelling inwardly at myself for the entire time of drafting this chapter as well. I do hope this isn’t too angsty because, well.

On that note, Nerea will have left Hydropolis by now.
As Roland had expected- and hoped, as dreams were unpredictable- sleep had abandoned him for the night, and as once the sky began to lighten up, he took a walk around the ruins. He had found a Dreamer’s Door while he was at it (sure was convenient, Roland thought), and the diary was at its third page.

By the time he returned, the others were up and putting their things away. He wasn’t surprised to get a few stares, but he shrugged. “Morning walk. Helps wake me up.” “That’s good to hear.” Evan offered as the six formed a circle. “I suppose we can go now?” On agreement, they made their way to the other end of the ruins.

They hadn’t been able to notice until now, but as they marched across the bridge at the edge of the ruined buildings, Tani gave a whoop. “That’s… an arm, isn’t it?” Upon looking to their right, they saw the enormous stone arm, extending from the structure before them- an empty helmet- and rising above the water. “This place was inhabited long ago.” Leander explained. “You can assume that this was once a place of worship.”

The bridge led into the helmet, which encircled a large plain of sand. It crunched under their shoes as they walked, bringing their weapons out. There didn’t seem to any large beast in sight. “So… what and where is this Cetus?” Evan asked, and Leander frowned. “Cetus is a beast that can collect souls that has been lost at sea.” That explained why the land was haunted. “Fearsome as it may be, it poses no threats to Hydropolis…” The Archon kept his hand on his glasses. “So why risk all our lives on-”

A loud rumbling noise interrupted Leander. The sand shook, bouncing up in puffs. Among yells of alarm, the sand shifted, and...

A tiny purple eel dug up from underground, swaying as it snapped its jaws. There was a moment of silence. “It sure doesn’t look very threatening.” Tani quipped. Roland heard a mutter of ‘something’s not right’, but stepped forward, holding his gun and charging Heavy Ammo. This should be quick. Toby tutted from beside him and the charge became more powerful, and he fired at the eel.

The attack kicked up a cloud of sand as it connected- something sprung from within it, latching onto his leg. Roland hissed as a stabbing ache travelled through the latter. The purple eel was not hurt in the least, he was alarmed to find as he fired at it in vain- its fangs had definitely pierced skin, but it was not severe enough to bring him to his knees: it was as though it was holding him in place-

The land rumbled, he raised his head to see an enormous pair of sword-sharp jaws lunging at him. “Roland!” Evan cried out behind him, but someone else had ran up, grabbing his shoulders- the next thing he knew he was watching gnashing jaws close a few steps in front of him. He looked to his left- Leander was grimacing as the beast reared up.

He would’ve died there and then.

Roland uttered a shaky word of thanks, hastily stuffing a soreaway leaf into his mouth. The pain in his shin lessened. He needed to properly thank Leander later. “Shit, Archon, ye can teleport?!” Batu yelled. Leander pushed his glasses up, spear floating next to him. “For short distances, yes! Now concentrate!”
Now towering meters above them, Cetus roared, brandishing knife-sharp teeth and a purple tongue. Layers of green seaweed wavered from its body. Tani shot an arrow at its head, but the monster had sunk back into the sand before it hit. A few moments later, it burst through the sand, and Tani was forced to jump back before the snapping jaws got to her. Cetus reared up to swing itself forward—“Gorgon!” At Leander’s shout, a spear of dark energy jabbed upwards and hit the sand-eel. With the brief knockback, Roland and Batu rushed in to slice at the monster, pieces and strands of green falling to the ground.

It buried underground yet again, appearing further away. They chased after it, but something else swatted at them, kicking up yet another dustcloud, followed up by a spout of high-pressure water from the monster. A watersphere burst through the dust, and they saw a tail before it disappeared into the sands.

The tunnelling shenanigans held up well for the monster—they couldn’t do much but try to get attacks while Cetus was above ground. There were still a few times where the beast’s swings hit, sending them flying, but they had plenty of Angel’s Tears and soreaways in supply. Eventually, Cetus roared and dug below ground. A few moments, and it did not surface. A survey of their surroundings—nothing had happened. Tani blinked. “Did Cetus… lose interes—”

The beast burst out of the sand, dipping as though swimming through it. Seaweed flaked off, turned red, and among shouts of ‘watch out!’ and whistling of arrows, bullets and magic, exploded. Exploding seaweed, Roland’s mind chanted, as he snapped open a sixth senser and kept shooting.

The rampage went on for some more, more vegetation shedding and bursting into fire. Cetus continued to attempt to circle them, but it was slowing down. Sand hissed as the beast moved—it was crumbling into dust. One of the attacks must’ve dealt the final blow—and as Cetus slowed to a halt from its desperate attack, the powder dispersed among the sand, leaving behind a shining blue stone. Lofty picked it up, and hopped back to the crew while they used a few more soreaways. “That’s… the Ocean’s Aether.” Leander spoke, recognising the egg-shaped rock. “Is that why Her Majesty sent us? But…”

Tani shrugged, grinning. “Well, we’ve slayed the beast, so we can get Hydropolis to sign the Declaration now! Right, Evan?” The young king didn’t respond, looking at the ground. “Evan?”

Roland knew it had to do with what happened earlier. He stepped forward, ready to give an apology. “Evan—” Before he knew it, Evan had ran forward. Arms wrapped around his waist. Evan sobbed quietly as he hugged the older man. “I thought…” A sniff. “I thought you were going to… die…”

He remembered. Evan murmuring Aranella’s name in his sleep. The governess taking the fire attack for the young king, the latter unable to do anything. A lonely boy, abandoned. He’d left them for dead. He’d nearly left him to be alone. He raised his hands, a whirling feeling in his head stopping him. The sands on the ground shifted. The stare from within the mist. Arms wrapping around his shoulders. He wasn’t allowed to. Fingers digging into his palms. Wasn’t his son. Why did it matter? A taste of bile in his throat. “I’m sorry.” He didn’t know what to do anymore.

After a while, the pressure on his chest left him. Evan stumbled backward, wiping tears from his eyes. Batu patted the young king on his shoulder. Evan nodded at Leander, chuckling sheepishly. “I…Thank you, Archon Leander.” Oh, right. Right. Roland turned to the Archon, smiling. His jaw ached, perhaps. “Thank you. I would’ve been done for.” Leander was quiet for a few seconds before pushing up his glasses. “We could teleport back to Hydropolis right now, but what about the boat?”

“I can take care of that.” Tani replied, holding her hands up in a cupping motion and then letting out a surprisingly loud holler, which wavered between notes and echoed around the ruins. Once she was
done, Leander blinked twice. “Out of curiosity, may I ask what that cry was?” “Tis a way of messagin’ for us sky pirates.” Batu explained. “What girlie did was a ‘return to base’ yell.” “And… forgive me- but can your fellow pirate hear it from this distance?” “Aye, Archon. We’ve all been trained t’have good ears.” “Hm.” The Archon looked intrigued, but brought out his staff. “In that case, we shall teleport back to Hydropolis.”

A circular rune appeared at their feet, expanding outwards, and soon they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

And... there goes our ol' Roland. God damn it.

Thank you for reading Chapter 45! I might take a short break on uploading because as of this chapter I've been hitting a block regarding fighting scenes for a few days(as usual). Knowing me i'm just gonna get right back to it and keep uploading chapters, but this is a heads up if that ends up happening.

As a note that I've kept forgetting to mention: Fawlon is 'following along', haha.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The archways leading to the eye tower appeared before them— they were back in Hydropolis. A guard noticed them and ran towards Leander.


Once they were in the seafloor palace, Leander crossed his arms. “When and where did this happen, Velis?” “We’re not sure— one of the priestesses found that Her Majesty had not appeared in the throne room today. We’ve searched the palace and Hydropolis from tip to toe, but Her Majesty is nowhere to be found!” Leander nodded, brows furrowed as Velis continued. “And we’ve just received notice from one of the scout ships that the vortex in front of the Abyss has disappeared!”

“The Abyss?!” Leander pushed up his glasses hastily. “Are you certain this has happened?” “Yes!” “What is the Abyss, Archon?” Evan asked. “The Abyss is where our kingmaker, Brineskimmer dwells— it is our king’s cradle.” The Archon grimaced. “And the vortex was placed there by Her Majesty. Only she could remove it… so…”

A hiss from Leander as he turned, walking towards the portal. “I should have known I was being removed from Hydropolis…! If we assume she left in the night, she would’ve gone for hours. Velis, with me— we must go after Her Majesty posthaste. Do we have a ship ready?” “As always, my lord!”

“Wait, Leander!” Evan called out, “Let us go with you! I have a feeling this is Naverre’s doing.” “And you need the help, I’m sure of it.” Tani added. Leander paused. “Naverre?” “We’ll explain on the ship.” The young king stated. “We have to go to the Abyss right away.” The Archon nodded. “Thank you… all of you. We shall go immediately.”

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“In conclusion, this Naverre is stealing Kingsbonds, and it is likely that Her Majesty is his next target?” Leander scowled. “I should’ve been more vigilant.”

“Ah— A question.” Roland coughed. “When it happened in Goldpaw, Naverre had simply ripped the Kingsbond from its leader. But Queen Nerea is heading to the king’s cradle. Why there?” “When a ruler wishes to relinquish their throne, they will travel to the cradle to negotiate with their Kingmaker.” The Archon tapped his forehead. “You mentioned that Goldpaw’s leader was questioned by his people, which led to his kingsbond being stolen. The people of Hydropolis may not have had a severely negative view of Her Majesty, and this Naverre had to take other chances.”

“But what could’ve led Queen Nerea to give up her throne like that? It’s got to be pretty serious…” Evan asked. The Archon looked away for a split second, but the boat hit the shore leading to the Abyss— a stone pillar that stretched below the seawater. Velis hurried to lower the planks. “We’re here, Archon Leander.” “Thank you. Let’s go.”

The interior of the Abyss was surprisingly not submerged in water, but instead were layers of blue
rock and coral, leading down to… Roland couldn’t see the bottom of it. Holes in the wall were covered by a transparent concave surface. Lofty hopped nearer to it, but Leander coughed. “I’d advice not to do that. Those are air bubbles. We wouldn’t want to know what would happen if they were broken.”

“I bet the Kingmaker’s right at the seabed.” Batu huffed. “How’d we get down there? We’ve got no rope or ladder or nuthin’.’” “We have puffer whelks. They can lead up safely down.” Leander pointed to a blue shell further down the rocky outcrop. “There’s one over there.” A closer view revealed that a stream of water was trickling out from one end of it. Cothea floated up to it and struck it, sending a crisp ring echoing in the hollow. The stream of water intensified into a jet with a boom, and the Archon turned around. “This should do it.” Roland wanted to ask how, but Tani beat him to it. “Are you saying we’re going to step on this water?” “Precisely.” Leander took off his glasses and tucked them away. “I’ll demonstrate.”

The Archon took a step back, then ran to leap onto the arc of water, holding his arms out to balance himself as he glided down to the platform below. The other four shared stares. “Are we going to fall if we lose our balance?” Tani yelled. “No! Your feet is encapsulated in the water for this spell!” Came the reply. They shared glances again, and Evan skipped forward to go down the water slide, with Lofty hanging off of his cloak. Tani followed soon after, leaving the two adult men watching the whelk continue to pump out water. Evan waved at them from below as Tani hopped onto dry land.


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“Are we there yet?” Lofty groaned, jumping off their… twentieth? A large number of water slides. Just as Roland couldn’t see the bottom of the Abyss, now he couldn’t see how high the rock walls seemed to travel. The jets of water they had previously used crossed each other above them. “This seems to go on forever…”

“We’re almost there. We’re already at the seabed.” Leander continued storming forward, pushing aside a stalk of coral. “We must be there before Brineskimmer arrives.” “What do you mean, Archon Leander?” Evan asked. “While the Abyss is its cradle, the entire sea is its home. In usual circumstances, even Queen Nerea herself would not know its whereabouts- it only hurries to aid when Her Majesty is in danger. We can only hope that Brineskimmer does not take Her Majesty’s situation as an emergency.” “Sounds like it ain’t the most helpful of Kingmakers..” Batu huffed. The Archon kept silent for a few moments. “If you put it like that… perhaps.”

“Wait.” Evan’s ears perked up as he walked. “I hear something up ahead. A… fight? Wait. There’s nothing anymore…” Leander’s eyes widened, and he started sprinting, prompting the others to run after him. The passageway widened into a platform of seagrass, with a shrine shaped like a shell at the very end. An air bubble kept the seawater at bay. Two figures were leaning on their staffs in front of it- one was Queen Nerea. The other was the snake-headed man, who stumbled backwards, but in his hand… was a blue orb of shining string.

They were a few steps too late.

“Your Majesty!” Leander yelled, and the two royals snapped their heads towards him. A flare of purple rose around Nerea as she smirked. She raised her staff and pointed at the Archon, orbs of water forming and propelling towards the newcomers. The Archon took out his staff- a dome surrounded the five and absorbed the attack before fizzling away.

“I see how it is… I underestimated her will to live.” Naverre straightened up. “To stall me for so
long- to muster the strength to fight me- all to wait for your rescue, Archon! Tell me, how does it feel to be a shining knight in armor?” Leander took a step forward. “You will return her to me. Now. You shall not threaten Hydropolis’ peace!” “Because Hydropolis would be nothing without its queen, yes? Tch.” The snake-headed sorcerer snarled. “I am merely letting the inevitable happen. You, especially, should know: unlike Her Majesty, who still believes you are unaware to this very moment.”

“You have to stop this, Naverre!” Evan shouted. “I know-” “SILENCE, HALFLING!” A bolt of dark lightning from Naverre forced the young king to duck to the side. “You know nothing of this mockery. You know nothing!” The snake-headed sorcerer returned his attention to Leander. “Hydropolis is doomed. You ruined your chance to escape- you have no choice now but to surrender.” The Archon summoned his lance and held it forward. “I surrender to none but Her Majesty!”

The plume of purple fire surrounding Nerea wavered into wisps. “...Lean...der?” She began to say, but a shadow loomed overhead before their view was blocked by a downpour of seawater. Once it cleared, a blue, tusked merbeast with fins fanning outwards glowered at them, eyes glowing red. “Brineskimmer…” Leander uttered. “The Kingsbond’s been broken, by yur!” Lofty jumped up to Evan’s shoulder. “Meanin’ we got a Realmwrecker to clobber!”

Brineskimmer reared up and gave a guttural howl, purple aura expanding into a whirlpool and enveloping all.

Chapter End Notes

And guess who’s just going to upload as usual.

Thank you for reading chapter 46! Offscreen, Queen Nerea stalled Naverre for an entire day, then fought him when she couldn't keep up the act anymore. The fact that there was basically no sense of time during the Hydropolis arc meant I gotta make do with something lol.

And next chapter's the fight with Brineskimmer, which I'll try my best on.
Once they found themselves transported to abyssal depths, Roland saw two immediate problems. One was that Queen Nerea was there, struggling to push herself off the floor. The other was Brineskimmer, who swam high above them. Naverre was nowhere to be seen.

Leander had immediately run towards his queen, aiming to take care of the first problem. “Yoy, mun- we’s got to get Briney off up there!” Lofty exclaimed. Evan brought out his wand in response, conjuring his trusty homing magic and releasing them. Roland, as he was very used to by now, readied his gravity-charged bullet when he saw the Realmwrecker respond to the attack and dive downwards towards them.

“Your Majesty, are you alright?” Roland heard Leander ask further back. “I… Brineskimmer!” Nerea sighed. “So… I lost after all.”

“Incoming! Weak spot on the left latter fin!” Tani yelled. The blue Kingmaker swooped past them, and the five let their attacks fly at the shining spot. It turned around, landing on the piece of seabed they were on. Weak spot on the left arm. When Evan got to it first, he performed a series of wind-infused stabs, the last of which brought Brineskimmer to its arms. A new point had appeared on its face, and Roland swung a Flatliner at it, both hitting the glowing spot as he had hoped. It reared up-an attack, probably- and a blast of white fired from its mouth, rising as Brineskimmer arched back. The air grew cold. A line of sparkling white on the ground, then icicles burst up from the ground, some of them remaining on the field. An oppurtunity for Higmakers, they realised. A few strikes on the ice, and sure enough, masked Higgledies burst out of them.

“Watch out!” Nerea shouted behind them, and a blue barrier rose between them and Brineskimmer as the latter attempted to tackle them from above. “Thank you, Queen Nerea!” Evan called back. A pin of darkness jabbed up at Brineskimmer- now that the queen was fine and was assisting with her own arsenal of magic, Leander had joined the fray as well.

As the Realmwrecker continued to fire off its ice beams, its body became encased in the same layers of frost, eventually forming an armor of ice. Roland found that his sword bounced off it with a tremble. “We’ve got to dispel it.” Nerea said, conjuring icicles from her staff. “It’s Brineskimmer’s method of defence!” The icicles skidded off Brineskimmer. “But nothin’s workin’!” Batu yelled as Kettle attempted to throw fireballs at it, only for the Realmwrecker to swim up and avoid the attacks completely. “The ice’s not meltin’!”

“The Higmakers!” Evan realised, and ran to the blue blobs, gesturing at Brineskimmer. They chirruped, clapping their hands. “What are they doing?” Leander asked, then looked up. “Wait, Brineskimmer’s-” Roland pulled Evan back by his cape before Brineskimmer could target the latter. A beam of ice hit the Higmakers head-on, the ensuing burst of cold air obscuring the beings. Oh no. Brineskimmer attempted another tackle soon after, squashing where the Higmakers would be and dispelling the mist. “Evan, what’s that next to your shoulder?” Tani’s question prompted the young king to look back. There was some sort of levitating water tank, with an attachment in the front. The pattern on the side of it was that of the Higmakers’ masks.

The Realmwrecker drew close again, and Evan turned around. The tank turned with him- and began firing pellets of water at Brineskimmer. An audible gasp from Evan indicated that he wasn’t in control. “It’s counteracting the ice magic…” Nerea commented, charging bolts of lightning. “How
“Experience.” Tani returned. “We’ll explain later.”

Seeing that its shields had been chipped off, Brineskimmer took to mobility, swimming away and taking aim with its ice beams. Three weak spots sparked to life- one broke immediately as the tank continued to shoot. The mer-beast roared and swooped close to fire, but it only let the six strike another glowing weakness. And then another, and the Realmwrecker tumbled down to the ground. A shine, brighter than before, enveloped Brineskimmer’s head.

“Let’s finish this, Evan lad!” Lofty said. Evan nodded, raised his sword and struck the beast. Brineskimmer dispersed into droplets of water, light enveloping their view.

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They found themselves back in front of the king’s cradle. All was quiet for a moment, then claps resounded from where the shrine was.

“And now, two kingmakers has fallen to your hand, halfling.” Naverre smirked as he walked closer. “It’s great to see a fellow king covering up for me.” Roland moved to block the sorcerer’s way- now that they were standing face to face, he found that without the snake decoration, the sorcerer would be slightly shorter than he was- and Naverre snarled. “Why? Why must you all mock me like this?!” Roland had no idea what he was talking about. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Naverre brought out a sword with a yellow blade, pointing it at Roland. The Chief Consul returned the favor by summoning his gun and aiming it at the other with a click, indigo sparks surrounding the air from in front of it. For a moment, Naverre gritted his teeth. Then a glow of blue beneath his feet- Leander must be casting his teleportation spell. Roland looked behind him, and found that the two Hydropolitans were casting the spell together. The previous battle with Brineskimmer must’ve drained their magic.

As the patterns on the ground developed, Roland found a question itching at the back of his mind: why hadn’t Naverre attacked yet? The orb of darkness had formed at the tip of his gun, and he held it. It was hard to see the sorcerer’s expression under the headdress apart from that he was grimacing- then the sight before him was replaced by the Hydropolitan throne.

He tried dispelling the attack. It didn’t work: his arm felt like it had gone to sleep. A thumping sound and an alarmed “Your Majesty?!” from Leander, and scuffling sounds behind Roland notified him that Queen Nerea may have been thoroughly exhausted. Couldn’t blame her, but- why won’t the damn ammo stop?!

Something knocked the gun out of his hand: Lofty, who landed neatly on the ground. A clatter, then skidding. The ammo, now disconnected, faded away into wisps along with the gun. The Kingmaker stared at him, tutted disapprovingly, then Roland was hurrying to see if he could help in any way among the bustling priestesses and guards.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 47! Honestly I'm still not very happy with this chapter but ehh I'm not happy with how I usually write combat anyway

And we've gone past 70k words. This is... way past my expectations, as I've probably
mentioned a few times, so sit tight and enjoy 0:

We'll finally be getting into the backstory next chapter, so please look forward to it!
“Archon, ye’ve been starin’ at the throne for nearly an hour now.” A thud as hand met stone. “Sit down. Yer legs are gonna give ye hell soon otherwise.” Leander turned around, pursing his lips for a moment. “I apologise if it’s… annoying, mister Batu.” “It’s not. What’s Naverre yappin’ about inevitable fates and whatnot, though?”

Leucothea murmured from next to Leander, and the Archon sighed. “I suppose it’s time you knew the truth.” He closed his eyes for a while. “The palace in which you stand was destroyed three hundred years ago, along with the rest of Hydropolis. An great undersea volcano erupted and took our nation and all its people with it.”

There was a uniform silence, and the Archon continued, “Her Majesty’s interference is the sole reason Hydropolis still stands. The Eye is a channeling device for her to cast a spell over the vicinity of Hydropolis; her gaze through it what allows her to turn back time to save us again and again. You know of the souls that linger in Leucippes’ Labyrinth, yes? The majority of them were the Hydropolitans who were unfortunately outside of the Eye’s reach, and were eventually rounded up by Cetus.”

So the whispered messages from the ghosts— the uniforms that they wore… Roland pinched between his eyebrows for a moment. Whoa. “Wouldn’t the Hydropolitans realise that people were missing?” Tani asked. “I believe Her Majesty may have cast an additional memory spell to counter that problem.” Leander pushed up his glasses.

“In any case, there was one crucial problem to this method of survival.” The Archon explained. “if the number of living souls in Hydropolis— the number of living souls that considered themselves Hydropolitans were to change, the spell Her Majesty over this nation would fall apart.” “And that’s why the laws were so specific, aye?” Batu asked. “One more life or one less, and it all comes tumblin’ down.” Leander nodded.

“Wait, Leander.” A question clawed at Roland’s mind— the memory of Leander telling Leucothea that it hadn’t happened. Yet. “Naverre said you knew the inevitable would happen— and that Nerea didn’t know you did. How did it happen then?” Leander gave him a look that said ‘I’m not surprised’. “I have Leucothea to thank for that.”

The water Higgledie circled Leander— only in the light of the throne room did Roland notice a rusty circlet around its neck, adorned by a green gem. “Your… Higgledie?” Evan asked. “Yes. It’s a long, convoluted story, I’m afraid. Let’s see…” Leander tapped on his glasses before taking out a book— the same book Leucothea had given Leander during their journey to the labyrinth. “It must’ve been the start of a new cycle— I was on patrol when Cothea led me aside and offered me this book. Normally, we are the ones to give offerings to Higgledies, so this gift— and the royal decorations Cothea bore naturally had me intrigued.”

Leander brushed this thumb over the cover. The pages crinkled with age. “I read it— to my initial confusion, I could recognise the handwriting as my own. The date seemed to loop back to the same day every few entries. Then there was one that explained that Hydropolis was under a time loop, I were to not let Her Majesty know of my revelation, and to return this to Leucothea in the outer seas if there was any change in the living souls in Hydropolis. After that, it was a list— a timeline of actions until something went wrong.”
A pause. “I… my memory is reset every cycle, as with the rest of Hydropolis. Leucothea must have come across my diary during one of my demises and as history repeated itself, kept delivering it to me, who would eventually piece it together. I, with the experience of my predecessors, would follow in their footsteps until something went wrong, then I would record it and leave it for the next Leander to take up the mantle.”

The throne room was silent, then Batu scratched his head. “Shit … Then why didn’t ye get out of ‘ere? Ye know that this place is doomed.” “I cannot.” Leander stated curtly. “I cannot leave Her Majesty. I may be fortunate to not remember the tragedies that befell Hydropolis: but what about Queen Nerea? She has maintained her vigil for three centuries, not knowing a moment’s sleep. What would she feel if even her closest advisor were to disappear and leave her alone with a doomed nation that she must keep watch on, over and over?” The Archon clenched his fists. “All that Her Majesty has done, she did for us; all that she had sacrificed, it was for Hydropolis- her beloved subjects. Since I know the truth, I must attempt to share that burden. I must be strong for her sake. I do not know if she needs it, but I do know that every Leander before me would have wanted me to do the same. After all… I pledged long ago that I would never leave her. That I would be by her side to protect her. And so I will.” Leander’s posture loosened. “That… is what I have to say, I suppose.”

They sat in awe, then a voice from the entrance of the throne room. “You knew. You knew all along…” Queen Nerea stepped forward. It was hard to discern her expression, but Leander held a gentle- sad- smile as he answered. “I am sorry to have kept secrets from you all this time, Your Majesty.” “It is not your fault.”

The two looked up at the throne. Queen Nerea sighed. “Brineskimmer’s absence will become the string that unwinds Hydropolis’ spell. Even turning back time will not regain the Kingsbond, I am afraid.” Leander nodded. “I know.” “Leander?” “Yes, Your Majesty?” “Do you have the Aether?”

“It’s with me.” Lofty said, and hobbled over to hand the rock to Leander. Leander held it carefully in his hands as Nerea cleared her throat. “Do you remember, Leander? The promise we made to each other as children?” “Yes, of course. It is my most cherished memory… and the reason I gave you my life in service.” This prompted Nerea to smile warmly. “Can you… recite it for me?”

The Archon briefly flushed red, flustered and glancing at the Evermore crew, but at a nod from Nerea, he cleared his throat. “I promise. I promise that I will marry you. That I will always protect you. That I will never leave your side. I swear it on my life.” “When will you make good of that promise, Leander?”

A pause. “The law of Hydropolis prohibits that I become king, Your Majesty. I could not, and I… cannot.” “Do not pretend, Leander. You know full well that whoever possesses the Aether has the right to rule- such has been since the first king of Hydropolis.” “I cannot…” “And who better, Leander? Who has watched over this realm more vigilantly? Cared for it more faithfully?” “I cannot. I am sorry, your Majesty.”

Leander stared at the throne floor, avoiding Nerea’s gaze. “Why, Leander? For the sake of your kingdom? The legacy of your many predecessors?” “I… I simply cannot let Hydropolis end. Not after your.” “Let go, Leander.” The Archon looked up in shock, and Nerea turned her gaze to her throne. “Our destruction should’ve happened long ago. When this realm fades, another shall blossom in its place. A new kingdom… new life. I should’ve let it happen, but I could not.” She clasped her hands. “And I had to have one last day by your side… again, and again, and again…”

She looked up, gaze determined. “But I have made up my mind. I am ready. The wheel must turn again for Hydropolis. If it- our being together brings destruction, so be it.” Leander closed his eyes—his brows tightened—before answering, “Your mind is made up, then?” “Yes. Come- take your place.
by my side. As my husband. My king.” The Archon bowed. “I will.”

Queen Nerea sighed, then cast her gaze at Evan. “I genuinely thank you for delaying Hydropolis’ fate, but I hope you can understand that Hydropolis will ultimately be unable to contribute to your union. I am truly sorry that I have to hold back on my word.” Evan kept silent, staring at the queen and prompting her to smile. “Don’t look so sad, King Evan. You’re welcome to stay in Hydropolis a while longer- but for now, we must account for our absence.”

The throne room’s doors opened, and Nerea nodded. “You may go now. May we all find peace, dear visitors.”

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They had just exited the hydroportal when Evan’s footsteps came to a halt. The other three turned to see him stare at the floor. “Come on, Evan.” Roland said, taking care to lower his voice. “I can’t let it end like that.” Evan muttered, and Batu sighed. “Ye gotta respect their choices, lad. It’s either that or continuing their suffering. There’s no extra choice here.”

The young king spun around towards the portal at that. “But I- I can’t let it end just like that!” Evan yelled, running onto the platform. The guard manning it blinked, and Evan disappeared in particles of light. “Evan!” Roland shouted, but obviously, that was too late. The three followed Evan back into the palace.

Chapter End Notes

Leucothea coming across the diary was sheer chance; eventually one of the Leanders informed her of the situation, named her and for the rest of the more than two hundred years, she has been trying her best to do what she can.

Thank you for reading Chapter 48! Honestly it didn't make sense that Leander would be aware of Hydropolis' past when Nerea, the one who cast the time reversal spell, didn't know that he knew, so here you go! I know the treaty hasn't been signed yet. That's for next chapter, because the mood whiplash from talking about a nation's destruction to signing a treaty is just, ???

Also thank you for 60 kudos!
“Please reconsider, Queen Nerea!” The young king could be heard from the throne room, and Leander looked up from his report while the rest of the Evermore ambassadors half-skidded into the room. Two guards raised their spears at him, but Queen Nerea shook her head, motioning for the guards to stand down. “You already know our reasons, King Evan. We can’t.” “Please, Queen Nerea!” Leander glanced at the Hydropolitan queen, then at the guards and priestesses still staring in curiosity, and sighed. “I’d like this room to be cleared, please.”

Once the throne room was once more closed and occupied by six people and a Kingmaker, Queen Nerea rest her hand on her face. “What is this sudden fuss about, King Evan?” “I… Your spell over Hydropolis would be broken if one soul is added or subtracted, right?” “Yes.” “Then if we remove everyone from Hydropolis at once, the spell’d still be broken, right?”

Nerea tilted her head, then smiled. “There are hundreds of people in Hydropolis, King Evan. Removing everyone from this place will take substantial amounts of time and effort- and where would you relocate them? I appreciate the thought, but that’s just not possible, young king.” “But you aren’t- Hydropolis isn’t alone!” Evan’s voice dropped with uncertainty after the declaration. “We... well, Evermore’s infrastructure is still rather basic, but we can improve it! Goldpaw has a protectorate that specialises in building ships, and if we let them do that… If push comes to shove, at least we’ll have something to fall back on… And...”

“You deserve to be remembered, Your Majesty.” Tani spoke up, and Evan glanced at her, nodding hesitantly. “Both of you, Queen Nerea, Archon Leander-” The bespectacled man frowned briefly at that. “- you shouldn’t be remembered as rulers of some sort of police state. You did your very best, and people need to know that- but we need something to be evidence that Hydropolis existed. That you did.”

There was a moment of quiet in the room, then Queen Nerea laughed, gently, without malice. “It would only be logical for a nation aiming for world peace to leave out one who would inevitably walk towards a fiery end, doomed to be left behind… But even then, you still wish for Hydropolis to enter the union?” Evan nodded, determined.

A few more seconds of tense silence, and Queen Nerea stood up with an air of finality. “Very well. I stand defeated.” A chuckle. “Children do think strangely, don’t they? We might have but weeks-days before our destruction, and yet you continue to rope us into your union- just for the sake of ‘last impressions’. ” Her eyes softened. “I shall humor that sentiment.”

“Thank you, Queen Nerea.” Evan stated, voice solemn. “I apologize for acting rashly previously.” “You should act rashly- you’ll soon lose the chance to do that without repercussions. I heard rumors that your treaty is a floating scroll?” This prompted an embarrassed smile from the young king, who summoned the luxurious piece. “Well, yes, thanks to our Kingmaker.”

The Hydropolitan queen stood opposite of Evan, and nodded. “Shall we?” Lofty clapped his hands, and the scroll floated between the two, unfurling. Nerea’s staff appeared in her hand, as with Evan’s twig. “Let our nations be joined, for the sake of the world.” Evan recited forward. Nerea did the same. “Let the banners of war ne’er again be unfurled.” They struck the items of royalty against each other. “United we stand, as one single land!” The green sigil rose from the paper, turned to the left- and a figure of Brineskimmer appeared on it before the entire pattern disappeared back into the
“The pact is sealed.” Nerea spoke. “And with that… Archon Leander.” “Yes, Your Majesty?” “I hereby release you from your duties- from now on, you shall act as Hydropolis’ ambassador.” Leander frowned, “Are you sure, Your Majesty?” “Yes. You are free to come back, of course- but allow me to try and take care of my nation for awhile. Think of it like a... paid holiday.” Nerea smiled for a moment. “Can you give me your diary?” Leander did, and Nerea held the book carefully. “May I keep this with me, Leander?” “Of course.”

The queen of Hydropolis went back to the throne and sat down. The throne doors swung upon, and the priestesses peeked in, widening their eyes at the still-floating scroll. One of them raised a Leafbook and snapped a picture. Lofty coughed and the scroll rolled up and returned to Evan’s arms.

Queen Nerea nodded. “You may be dismissed, my fellow travellers. Congratulations on gaining the support of a second nation.”

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When they left the Hydropolitan palace, this time with Leander in tow, Leucothea floated in front of them. “Cothea?” The ambassador asked, and the Higgledie glowed blue for a moment. The blue form shifted out from the rusty bangle- and the old piece of cloth underneath- and as the Water Higgledie reformed from next to it, the two items floated over to Leander, who caught them in his hands. “...Cothea?” Leander asked again, narrowing his eyes in confusion.

Leucothea bowed, then squeaked something. Leander’s eyes widened in shock, then the Higgledie had floated over to the waters and jumped into it with a quiet ploosh. “What’s wrong, Leander?” Evan asked. The Hydropolitan pushed up his glasses, blinking his eyes rapidly as he thought. “She spoke to me. That there’s something she wants to do. She’s never… talked to me before...” “I think Auntie Martha can talk to Higgledies too.” Evan offered. “She might-”

A shift in the waters, and among shouts from the people near the vicinity, a form rose from the sea further away- a arm, made of water, waving twice before gently melting into the waves again. Leander watched, frowning and holding the bangle. “I suppose now that the diary will not be lost anymore, she’s free.” He turned to the group, the items fizzling away in specks of light as they were absorbed into the arms band.

“Well... well!” Tani put her hands on her hips, grinning. “Since you’re now Hydropolis’ ambassador, how does a tour around Evermore sound? Queen Nerea may say that you’re shirking your duties if you stay around here.” The rest of the Evermore visitors nodded hastily, and Leander pushed up his glasses as he answered. “You have a point. I would appreciate that, yes.”

“So what are we waiting for, good fellas?” Lofty asked, hobbling in front of the five. “I gotcha teleportation spells learned thanks to glass boy’s demonstrations, so we don’t need to take the long route.”

Chapter End Notes

And with all the implications of Hydropolis’ future I’m just gonna get all of them the heck outta there. Oof. I’m starting to feel this is getting too depressing for our own good.

Thank you for reading Chapter 49! Evan’s desperate babble is actually from one of the
previous ideas I had for what happens after Hydropolis, but it... doesn't make sense so I scrapped it.

I need a bit of time to plan out what happens during the Evermore tour so I'm gonna take another break here. If there are any ideas I'd appreciate them haha.
“And… this is the castle!” Evan turned around. “There’s a few living quarters for our higher-ranked officials, and thanks to the people here, we’ve been able to build a library as well.” Leander was staring at the ceiling of the castle- a few flags lined the pillars, but blinked when Evan mentioned the library. “A library, you say?” The Hydropolitan asked, interest piqued. “What kind of books, may I ask?” Hau Ling stepped forward. “May I? Li Li and I were the ones to sort them.”

During the month they were gone, there had been… quite a few changes, Roland thought as he took a stack of documents from Niall and scanned over them. A population boom, of sorts- thirty-eight people, including the assisting soldiers. A team of archers and herders- ‘with no mercy’? Alright- led by a Grimalkin named Muriel and recruited by Bai Gon during one of his morning hunts. They had rounded off an empty field for their alpacas (Roland was sure that wasn’t the name for these creatures, but from the sketch provided, that was the closest word.), and now stood in a mutual alliance with the adjacent farm that Munokhoi, a sky pirate had set up. There was Persha, the seamstress the four had run into at Goldpaw, and at her insistence, a dogfolk outfitter named Pi Chi had moved to Evermore with her. And then there was Ketch and his crew of shipwrights who found Evermore to be a splendid opportunity to branch out; they had sneaked into the Heartlands in the middle of the night and nearly, as per Min Ti’s narration, ‘would have become a mass of bullet holes if not for Minister Niall’s intervention’. To make up for the fiasco, they had taken to building a shipyard, which was a few days away from completion. And there were still profiles of the individual citizens and soldiers that Roland made a note to look over later.

Construction-wise, apart from the necessary house-building, there had been attempts to replace the wooden constructs with stone- especially the outer fort walls- to avoid the possibility of accidental fire scorching their few measures of defense. Such had been done to one fourth of it, and while they were able to scout good-quality stone, they needed both approval and time to continue. Roland took a page with the word ‘casino’ in the title out of it and handed it back to Niall, who gave a hearty laugh.

“I think I would find the books intriguing, yes.” Leander had concluded while Roland rearranged the papers. “If possible, I’d like to visit the library. It would do well for me to learn a thing or two about… how other countries depict recent history, with all the events that had happened.”

Roland was glad he caught onto that sentence. “I’ll go with you.” He raised his free hand. “Got to have someone to accompany our guest, right?” “Well… sure.” Evan answered. “Do tell us if you need anything, Leander!”

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The library was quiet. No one was required to man it- Li Li had fashioned a security incantation over the entire room that would make anyone be unable to leave with a registered book. (“They should learn a thing or two about attentive reading.”) The two had settled down opposite each other at a table, and for a while, there was no noise but the rustle of papers and footsteps in the corridor outside.

“...the nations we’ve had diplomatic relations with three hundred years ago all fell within these few centuries.” Leander muttered suddenly. “Even the ones of the mer… No wonder…” He looked up. “And all the others too. Goldpaw, Broadleaf- these were built recently in comparison.” Roland
wasn’t sure what to respond with- last time he read up on nations, he’d only focused on the ones that existed. “Uh, yeah.”

Leander hummed, tapped his glasses. “You say this Naverre has been trying to take Kingsbonds. How long ago?” “I heard that his nation- well, allegoria- fell two thousand years ago.” Roland blinked. “Wait, you don’t mean-” “Yes. He could be the reason to these countries’ demise. The question is why…” The Chief Consul brought a hand to his chin. “Niall said it might have something to do with him trying to bring his Kingmaker back. And he’s been influencing people with its powers. Including queen Nerea- I saw the purple smoke when she tried to attack us.”

Roland’s answer prompted Leander to widen his eyes. “Give me your hand, Roland.” “What?” “That one.” Oh, right. Roland reached forward his right hand, and after a quick glance at the library door, the hydropolitan tugged the glove off, inspecting the corrupted mass. “That’s why I found it familiar- I sensed something similar on her majesty. This corruption- it must be related to the horned one.” Oh, hell- Roland leaned over to inspect, and noticed something. He tugged the sleeve upward. The swirling colors now stopped right below his elbow. “It spread.” Roland commented. “It did.” Leander answered. “But then I don’t understand.” Roland muttered. “Why is it physi-”

“I knew it.” A voice piped up from next to them, and Roland yanked his hand away, suppressing a yelp. A few papers scattered to the floor. Lofty jumped onto the table between them. “For the sake of-” “I told youers truly that you should be more careful with that. You know what’s goin’ to happen, do you?” Leander was looking between him and Lofty now. Roland folded his arms. “I was told that I’m going to die.” “No, no- youer gonna get shunted off between realms, by yur. And that ain’t gonna be pretty, not one bit.”

He blinked. “I… what?” Meanwhile, Leander had frowned. “What do you mean?” “I know how they were experimentin’. You make Kingmakers by fusing a soul from the physical realm with a power from the magical realm- anything goes wrong? Poof, they get lost in-between in a blink. Nothing of time in there- they wait until they lose themselves, mind, soul and body in the abyss. Right nasty.” Roland put his glove on, mind whirring to raise a question. “Wait- wait. How do you know? You’re one of the old Kingmakers. You couldn’t…” “I- that’s what I know on the matter, yeah? Don’t go losin’ control now. None of us wants to see that happen.”

Lofty jumped down from the table and waddled out of the room. Roland bent down to pick up the papers. If Lofty picked this moment to reveal information… “Guess he heard us during that boat trip.” “I believe so.”

Paper scraped against the wooden floorboards as he gathered them- one of them scrunched slightly. He… wouldn’t die? The sheet was pushed further away, and he squinted to make a grab at it. He wouldn’t. Something worse. His index fingers brushed against the paper- snatched it. He felt bile behind his throat, and straightened up, exhaling air. Steady- another sound of crinkling paper as he carefully settled them back on the stack. A shaky feeling behind his jaws.

“…you look terrible.” Leander said, quietly. Roland tilted his head. “Do I?” Ah well. Back to document-viewing, then. He took a page off the top of the pile and looked at it. A dull ache was settling behind his eyes- he looked at the paper again. A word or two blurred into each other.

He didn’t understand. “I don’t understand.” He found himself muttering. “I have never interacted with Naverre until- until Brineskimmer. He did disguise as Mandarin when we were in Goldpaw- but where did he find the opportunity? Why isn’t he- what- making me think about regicide?” He brushed some hair from in front of his eyes. A whining noise in his ears. “How did it spread? Why didn’t he attack when we finished fighting Brineskimmer? Was he lying? Why did it start in the first place? Why haven’t I- I don’t… I don’t think I-” Roland covered his mouth with his hand. Shit, he
shouldn’t have lost control. “I’m sorry.” He removed his hand. A singular request floated among the nauseating cesspool. “Please. Don’t tell the others.” Leander frowned- as though with some sort of pity. He didn’t want- “Please.” The Hydropolitan pursed his lips. “…very well.”

Roland almost felt relieved- deflated, perhaps. He stared at the paper on the desk: only for it to be taken out of sight. A gentle but firm pressure on the top of his head. He was too tired to fight against it. His forehead met the wooden surface. A quiet whisper. “Shh.” A wave of... something, and everything became both lighter and darker.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I'm following a three-strikes-and-you're-out policy.

Thank you for reading Chapter 50! Glad to see that our celebration of this milestone is a few cans of fridge horror being opened. I've tried to leave a few hints here and there too- feel free to challenge and/or guess here or on my blog, haha.

I think I can sum up the Hydropolis arc- which should be concluded within these two chapters with a question of 'why in the flippin' heck haven't they flipped yet?'. Although I'm also not surprised at all that the arc with the most wiggle space ended up being the... most distressing one to write so far lol
Roland didn’t want to be in his office. The two cups of tea continued to release white wisps of smoke into the air. Doloran sat opposite him, silent. The whirl of thoughts coagulated when he saw.

“You lied to me.” He found himself speaking. The masked man lowered his head. “It’s a fate worse than death.” “Why did you lie to me?” “If I said you would be lost between realms, you would think that you could escape from it. I didn’t want to you to convince yourself.” A pause, and Doloran shook his head. “It was difficult to explain. When you jumped to that conclusion, I… thought it was best not to argue.”

The rational part of his mind conceded to the fact that he would indeed believe that there was some kind of way out. But those two endings weren’t the same. Not at all. Roland stared at the cup closer to him. The surface had gone completely still.

Doloran looked up. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault.” A familiar voice. It’s my fault you’re like this. A spark of heat lashed across Roland’s mind.

“IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT!” A crash of porcelain. Roland had stood up before he was aware. Under his right hand was a crushed teacup. The liquid spread and dripped down the side of the table. Doloran shrunk, having flinched at the noise. A wisp of black floated from between the other man’s hands. The scene before him registered. The feeling of fingers digging into his palms.

There really was something wrong with him.

He sat down, resting his hand on his forehead. What should he say? “I… I apologise. That was rash of me.” Roland closed his eyes.

The sound of dripping water continued for a while.

“...what should I do, Doloran?” He asked, suddenly feeling numb. A shift of cloth from opposite him. “What should I do?”

“What do you want to do?”

There was a lot, some of which only brought a dull ache in his chest, so he brought his arms around himself. That would do. There was only one option that was realistic, really, he thought as eventually the dream slipped away. A crash course on magic, if he had to put it.

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Roland woke up to sense fabric under his forehead instead of wood. He had been slumbering in the crook of his elbow. It was sundown- yellow light flooded the room. He had to admit, the nap did make him feel a lot less wobbly. (Unless it wasn’t, which would mean he slept for more than an entire day and made things awkward.)

He sat up, turning his head to get rid of the stiffness in his neck, and ruffling could be heard. He turned around on his chair and watched an entire blanket fall to the floor. The stack of papers were gone- he bent over, picked the blanket up and folded it before placing it on the table. There wasn’t much to do here. He stood, but a wave of nausea hit him as he did. He held onto the side of the table,
the thundering in his ears holding up for a while. Well, he had been sitting down for hours. Couldn’t be helped. Exhaling, Roland made his way out of the door.

“Roland?” A voice piped up behind him. He turned around to see Evan, jogging up to him. The young king didn’t look extremely concerned, so he shouldn’t have slept an entire day. “Oh. Hey, Evan.” Oh yeah, the profiles and all. “Have you seen the stack of papers anywhere?” “I’ve read through them. The new citizens seem trustworthy- I’ve also approved the replacement of the materials, so there’s only the overseeing of the many constructions that we need to handle.”

That was quick. “Good job. You’re learning pretty quickly.” “Heh… don’t say that- I had help.” Evan coughed. “Well, it still took a while… but I thought I’d check up on you when I was done.” He stared at Roland. “Are you feeling alright?” Roland expected said question. “Yeah. I feel rested enough.” A moment of silence, and Evan frowned. “I’ll try to be honest with you. You… feel different since our journey to Hydropolis.” A mild ache in Roland’s stomach. “I haven’t been on a boat for a long time.” It was the truth. “I guess I got more tired than I thought.”

Evan’s ears twitched. “Roland… what did you see in the labyrinth?” Ah. Roland opened his mouth, but… he couldn’t quite find where to start. If he started tugging on the end of the string it would come apart. He looked away. The younger boy made some kind of noise and continued. “You haven’t been sleeping well for the last month, which was why you started taking up night shifts. You haven’t really talked to us about anything other than work. Tani says you’ve been trying to avoid us starting as far as when we left Goldpaw. And when we fought Cetus…” A pause. Roland searched for an answer and smiled. “I never thought you three to be worrywarts. I apprecia-”

“Something’s troubling you- something’s really troubling you!” Evan interrupted him, a tremor in his voice. “Even Leander’s able to see that you’re exhausted. We’ve been working on Evermore since its beginning together- I can’t… I don’t want to see you like this.” His ears had flattened against his head. “So please, Roland. Talk to me.”

A sound of a whisper in his ear. Roland looked away again as he answered. “I’m…” A trembling feeling in his chest. “I’m sorry, Evan. I don’t feel ready to talk… yet. I promise I’ll tell you when I’m ready,” Evan seemed to hesitate for a moment, then- “And when is that, Roland?” He didn’t know. “Just… give me some more time to process.”

That seemed to convince the younger boy, who nodded and went forward. Roland was about to ask- Evan hugged him. He wanted out before his eyes started feeling too dry. He raised his hand to pat Evan’s back, and eventually, the hug ended. The blonde-haired boy stepped back, and Roland smiled. “I’ll get back to you later.” There was something in Evan’s expression- Roland turned around. He should remember where the guest rooms are.

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“Are you watching me?”

Purple coiled around a blue pillar. The snake-headed sorcerer held a sword with a pale yellow blade. His hand tightened for a moment.

“If it never succeeded up till now… Then… it is just another lesson, right?” Naverre’s voice wavered. “I’m stronger now. I learned a lot already. All that there is to nations and their flaws…”

The cauldron lit up, showing briefly a mechanical kingdom. “Just a few more now…” The two pillars illuminated the room. “You were the one to teach me that Kingsbonds held insurmountable power, formed from a wish to change the world. It should work. It has to.”
The room was dark once more, with only red and blue lights illuminating it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 51! To be very honest if this was written in anyone else's perspective Roland's just going to be the most infuriatingly unresponsive person I've ever had to type for. What a mess.

Next chapter we'll do a quick montage and wrap up Hydropolis' arc! The plot's got to start moving somehow.

I don't understand why in the game they only showed snake man in his own cutscene once. So here's a tiny tiny hint for Naverre, haha.
Roland knocked on the door. “Come in.”

Leander was writing on a piece of paper when he opened the door, and the Hydropolitan looked up. “Roland. You look even worse. What happened?” “Don’t worry, it’s the lighting.” The sun was low outside, and cast a shadow over where he stood. “I’m here to ask something. Mind if I close the door?” Leander seemed to understand and nodded. The door closed with a click.

“Lofty said a Kingmaker’s power comes from the magical realm.” Roland recalled. “You were trained to be a mage, right? How does one learn to control magic?” Leander frowned. “Magic of this magnitude will take forever to master.” “I just need the basics. To, say, be able to keep an eye on the strength I’m using. Li Li and Hau Ling are much more perceptive than one can imagine, so I’m afraid I can’t ask them. How many days do we have?” The Hydropolitan hummed, then flexed his fingers as he counted. “With the statistics I have… eleven days. Queen Nerea’s abolished all of the laws- that’s when Rejuvenate will fall apart, and there will be at most three days before the volcano erupts.” “Guess it’s cram school time, then.”

Leander frowned. “Cram…?” Ah, the feeling of deja vu. “Teach me what you can to someone who’s never learnt what magic is. I’m sure there’s some kind of light source in the library when I read the books later.” “Don’t.” Leander had taken off his glasses and was rubbing furiously at his eyes. “Just… don’t. They’re not friendly to newcomers. And I have first-hand experience of what not sleeping for days does to you.”

The Hydropolitan summoned his wand, muttering something, and runes- images? appeared briefly on the table. Leander nodded, then turned around, handing the other man a notebook and another wand that he’d taken from his arms band. “We’ll go to the library- it wouldn’t take long once you’ve gotten the hang of it. Practice’s up to you since you’re Chief Consul and have your own duties, but by Brineskimmer’s fins, do not let me hear that you’ve been staying up.”

Roland chuckled at that. “Tall order, but I’ll try. Thanks.” “Don’t think about it.”

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As he’d expected, among the supervision of all the construction work, a celebration of the Evermore boatyard being completed, a brief attack by a gang of monsters and bandits, an invitation to a mock battle from Goldpaw (who’d received news of the king’s return and success) and therefore a hubbub of activity to prepare for another battle, there really wasn’t much time for practice. He was thankful that he’d been able to write a transcript of the lecture- an ability picked up during his days of education and work.

Now that he was aware of it, it made sense that he’d have a harder time to grapple magic with a gun- it was a simple act of waiting for a moment to pull the trigger, whereas with the wand, one would intentionally think of the formation of a spell. And while his nonexistent experience with magic slowed things down, he was at least conscious of the process. Eventually he should be able to apply the same theory when using his gun, although trying to concentrate with a wand brought him nothing but headaches at the moment. (“Take it slowly.” Leander told him.)

But the ten days soon passed, and Leander stood in the main castle hall as he announced his
leavetaking.

“I’m sorry there isn’t much to see around here, Leander.” Evan replied, approaching the ambassador. Leander pushed up his glasses. “I would not say that. I was there to witness the mock battle- you and your army have quite the tactical mind. I’m sure your nation will have quite the bright future ahead of it.” A moment of silence, and the Hydropolitan stepped back, a blue sigil forming at his feet. “I suppose it is time.” Evan nodded quietly in answer, and with a flash of light, the Hydropolitan disappeared.

The rest of the day- and the day after that passed with an air of apprehension, which Niall was able to notice. The Minister of Finance ended up arranging for Hau Ling to do a fortune telling. “A star shall fall, and from it, a galaxy rises.” She said, and the four shared worried glances. “That doesn’t sound good at all.” Tani muttered, and Niall frowned at them.

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On the third day after Leander left, Evan was staring and pressing on the Leafbook when he gave a yelp. “What is it?” Batu had asked, and the young king showed them the post. One of the Hydropolitans had posted of a strong, but brief tremor in the city. A comment replied that since the leaders had been fairly calm about it- Queen Nerea had been quite active during Leander’s absence- there was no need to worry. “It’s… really starting.” Evan stated, staring at the screen. Batu sighed and took the Leafbook from the younger boy. “Sittin’ here frettin’ ain’t gonna do ye any good, lad. We’ll go patrol the kingdom, aye?” A pause. “And ye’re comin’ along, Roland.” Roland blinked, looking up from his notebook. “I said nothing about not going.”

It took only a few paces out of the castle for them to notice a blue Higgledie waddled past them. A few more paces, and to their right, a line of Water Higgledies were marching out of the Higglery, whereas Auntie Martha was standing aside, following with interest. “Auntie Martha!” Evan called out, and the old woman looked up while the younger boy jogged over. “What are they doing, Auntie Martha?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve heard of it, but even with my age, I’ve never witnessed it.” The old lady tapped her chin. Runcible jumped down from atop her hat and tried to get the Higgledies’ attention without success. “It’s like a calling. One of their kin is ready to fulfill a chosen purpose, and they’re going to witness it.”

The procession of Water Higgledies continued out of the fort walls, and the five followed them to the shore of the beach, where the spirits raised their arms, a blue glow enveloping them. The waves lapped on the shore, and as the shoreline receded, Runcible squeaked. A blipping sound came from the Leafbook Batu had been holding, and Evan turned around- but the sky pirate was already stooping and showing them the posts.

The first one was a text: that an earthquake had just happened in Hydropolis. One of the abandoned watchtowers had collapsed, a lot of people were shocked, but the houses were still intact. Just as the moderator voiced their concern, someone else posted a picture of said watchtower: now a pile of rubble.

But Hydropolis hadn’t blown up in a plume of smoke. Yet.

A few minutes later, a message from the moderator warned everyone in Hydropolis not to stay near the piers. Immediately afterwards, a photo from Hydropolis showed a glowing blue barrier surrounding the nation, with subsequent photos showing the same in different locations of Hydropolis and questions on what it was. “Didn’t Queen Nerea decide to stop using time spells?” Tani asked, eyes widened. “I… I don’t know.” Evan muttered, staring at the screen for any updates.
There weren’t any for the next ten minutes- then a wave of posts. Some were pictures of water covering nearly half of the barrier, above where the sealine should’ve been. One was of a wave rising in the distance. A minute or so later, the posts were replaced- compiled into a single archive by the moderator.

‘Just now, there had been an earthquake west of Hydropolis, which was followed by a tsunami. Part of the Abyss had collapsed, according to reliable sources. Thankfully, Hydropolis' leaders was able to set up a spell to protect it from destruction. Updates to the situation in Hydropolis will go in the comments. Thank you for the cooperation. - LB Moderator’

As they continued to watch comments appear on the Leafbook(‘The coral reefs to the east couldn’t have possibly survived this!’ , the most recent one said), a chirrup could be heard from the edge of the water. The Water Higgledies began to sing in chorus- a quiet, poignant song. When it was over, they filed back among the yellow grass in the direction of the nation. Auntie Martha followed after them, dabbing her face with a handkerchief.

"Hydropolis ain’t destroyed?" Batu muttered. Evan looked between the tablet and Auntie Martha, still stunned. “It isn’t.” The young king turned around. “We should go back- if there’s any help we can give to Hydropolis, we should get ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 52! As I probably foreshadowed pretty badly, Leucothea, our more than three hundred years old Higgledie just went and flattened an entire volcano. Which caused a huge wave, but setting up a barrier is much more manageable than trying to stop the land from crumbling and boiling at your feet. Makronos is still destroyed and so is Hydropolis' fishing industry, but they're alive and have the support of two other nations so that's a thing. And that's the contrived deux ex machina I'm gonna provide.

On another note, I see yall being upset about Roland not returning the hug last chapter. Don't worry, he'll reciprocate later on.
A new journey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took two weeks for things to settle down in Hydropolis— it was obvious that the fishermen wouldn’t be getting hauls from the nearby waters for a while, and after a few negotiations and meetings, a trade system was set up. (“Finally using our stores o’ dried meat.” Batu joked.) Tripdoors were also shared between the nations so anyone could travel between the three nations now.

Leander appeared in Evermore three days afterwards. “Queen Nerea’s removed me from all of my duties.” He stated curtly. “Please assign me to something.” Roland looked at Evan, who was covering up an amused smile. “Minister of Magic, I suggest?” The young king hummed in answer, bringing his hand to his chin. “We’ve got Li Li ‘nd Hau Ling handlin’ things over there. I’d say… Librarian.” Batu announced. “We’re makin’ him librarian.” The Hydropolitan opened his mouth, then simply gave a displeased squint. Tani snorted and replied. “Yeah, we should make him librarian.”

Evan waved his hand and the two sky pirates stepped back, still grinning. “I thank you for your kind offer of assistance. How does Junior Consul sound? You’ll work with Roland.” “It will be an honor, King Evan.” The Junior Consul bowed, then turned to Roland. “I shall try not to disappoint you, Roland.” Roland decided to wave in reply. “You won’t, most likely. Welcome aboard.”

After giving Leander some time to unpack his things from his arms band, they gathered once more in the main castle hall. “Now that we have two nations that have signed the treaty, I suppose it’s time to turn our sights elsewhere.” Evan took out a map, holding it with one hand and resting the other on his chin. “There’s Broadleaf, and… Ding Dong Dell. Opting for Broadleaf probably is the better option…”

“Big problem is, Broadleaf’s on the other side of the giant oceanic rift thingy.” Tani commented, and Roland found himself not understanding what she meant. He thought better than to ask about it. Tani glanced at him before continuing, “Y’know, the big tear in the ocean? Rumored to have happened many centuries ago when something tore up the ground? Our boat’s not equipped to handle that.”

So that meant they couldn’t go to Broadleaf by sea? Roland brought his hand to his chin as he mused. From previous experience, birdmobiles would not do. “That’s simple.” Leander spoke up, “We shall simply have our boat jump over the rift.”

The four stared at the Hydropolitan, who continued, “There are parts of the rift that are connected to updrafts. Your ship should be able to leap over these updrafts…” Leander seemed to notice the expressions and frowned. “What?”

Batu was the first to speak. “Ye what now?” Leander frowned at the question. “Can it be really the case that you have never seen a boat jump before?” “I didn’t take you to be a comedian.” Roland added while the Junior Consul glanced between the four, a grimace finding its way onto his face.

“…forgive me.” Leander kept his hand on his glasses to hide his rather obvious embarrassment. “Jumping boats are a daily occurrence in Hydropolis— I assumed it would be so everywhere. Perhaps it is not.”

“Our ship can’t jump… But that means you have the knowledge on how to make it happen, right?”
Evan asked. Leander nodded. “I should be able to supervise the modifications, yes. Evermore’s shipyard would be sufficient. I will go take a look at the ship now, if you may.”

With that, the newly appointed Junior Consul turned around and walked briskly out of the castle. Batu was grinning again. “Enthusiastic, isn’t he?” The kids nodded. Roland did the same, folding his arms. Anyone would be enthusiastic if they were given a second life, he mused. He was. A needling sensation gathered between his eyebrows.

“I’ll go see if I can help.” Roland said, heading out of the hall. “Leander might have trouble understanding what the Capstan shipwrights are saying.”

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By the time the boat completed its modifications after two weeks, Roland still couldn’t quite wrap his head around the mechanics of it. By concept, having two retractable ‘fins’ catch the updraft and lift the ship until it landed on the other side of the abyss made sense, but at the same time it didn’t.

The Evermore shipwrights were very eager to unleash their creativity on the ship, now that according to them, Mr. Wright wasn’t around to standardize things. Various gadgets were fitted onto the ship— for stabilization, speed, lights, letting the ship respond to tripdoors, and to quote Ketch, ‘t’ improve aesthetic’, whichever he meant. Some kind of airhorn was fitted on the front of the ship so more timid monsters could be scared off with a press of a button. (The first time they tried blasting it down at the Heartland beaches, a whamster was witnessed diving into the sea.)

Meanwhile, there were more people who had decided to move to Evermore: two Hydropolitan jewellers who shared the prospect of selling their crafts to Goldpaw, and a young dogfolk girl who lead a troop of lancers and wanted to develop her talents without drawing attention away from her brother. With more and more soldiers gathering, Gao Jia found it necessary to allocate more land outside the fort for training, which took its batch of materials and time.

And of course, there were the evening lessons on magic that took place once they had dealt with the documents they were assigned to for the day. They were able to attribute the energy to dark-based magic— “Obviously,” Leander had muttered— with a preference to gravity as compared to the more physical forms that Leander would conjure. On the tenth day, Roland thought he saw the pen move by a millimeter, but there were more evenings when the two would just sit quietly in the library until the sun had set completely. Maybe if he tried harder he’d have more progress, but Roland appreciated it.

Once Ketch reported that they had test-driven the ship, the five gathered in the main hall to hold a meeting on the closest route to Broadleaf. Roland was the one to bring up that starting from Leucippe’s Labyrinth would save them days of travelling. It earned him a few concerned stares.

“We’re only there for a minute at most.” He explained. There was a few seconds of uncomfortable silence before Batu huffed and conceded. “The lad’s right.”

This time, they remembered to obtain some ghost-warding charms from Li Li that prevented interaction.

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Once they appeared on Leucippe’s shores, however, they were startled to be quite literally greeted by the same hordes of armored ghosts, who stood some paces away. Once they were alerted to the five’s presence, there was a shuffle of movement.
“What are they doing?” Tani asked, but the ghosts had kneeled on one knee in unison.

Leander nodded at Evan, handed the other his warding charm and stepped forward. “Please, stand, brave souls.” Soundlessly, the ghosts did. The bespectacled man bowed his head. “Hydropolis has a new tomorrow. It will be tough, but I pledge to march on. You can rest easy now, after all these years... may you find peace.”

It was hard to see at first, but slowly, the ghosts were enveloped by a warm light. A mist that shimmered in the sunlight as it faded, revealing the labyrinth as it was- an empty landscape of ruins. Leander turned around, expression hard to decipher- relief, perhaps.

“Come. We have a rift to jump over.”

Chapter End Notes

If anything, the mood for Broadleaf’s arc should be a bit lighter, so we might want to start here.

Thank you for reading Chapter 53! A friendo over on tumblr mentioned that the consul meetings were probably more like therapy sessions when Leander joins the crew, and now that I’ve actually put a pen over it, that’s exactly correct lol. We’ll do our little infodump on Broadleaf next chapter, haha.

Thank you for 70 kudos!
“Now that we’re well on our way to Broadleaf—” Batu scratched behind his head, half a day after they set out from Leucippes’. “Just what kind o’ country is it? I’ve never ventured as far as Autumnia.”

“We have had a few people hailing from Broadleaf just a few months ago selling… Leafbooks? I remember that to be the word.” Leander replied, turning the control wheel carefully. “They were quite persistent. In any case, Broadleaf is quite the mysterious kingdom. They were founded on a magic called ‘science’- a means to manipulate nature, like magic… but unlike it.”

Roland coughed after downing the sip of water. Science isn’t magic, his inner dialogue quipped. Evan put his hand on his chin as he said, “It’s ruled by President Zip Vector, an inventor who led what was a small business to become an industrial nation almost overnight… but there’s been reports of political unrest, as well as troubles with their people… which means there’s going to be a mess in front of us.” “That’s true.” Leander commented, then pointed to something along the horizon. “But let us not get our spirits down. Look.”

In the distance, the tides changed- in almost perpendicular directions. A roar accompanied the tutting of the boat’s engine. “We’re getting closer to the rift.” Leander stated. “Soon, the ‘wings’ fitted onto this boat can be put to use.”

“Wait- wait.” Batu blurted. “Are ye sure these wing-dings are functional?” Leander pulled down the lever on the side of the control panel, and with some clanking, the white constructs spread out, the waves forming foam along them. Pushing the lever up folded the wings again. “They should be.” The Junior Consul concluded.

The rest of the hour or so of closing the distance between the ship and rift was spent by once again checking that everything had been fortified, especially below deck. All the while, the roaring sound grew louder. Soon, Fawlon called them to return to deck. (“Don’t want any of ye smashing yer heads on the ceilings.”)

The rift was… well. It was almost like looking at a waterfall, which would be impressive if they weren’t heading towards one at that very moment. Before them, wind howled, loud enough to compete with the roaring waters.

“Grab onto one o’ the railings and squat!” Batu yelled, just enough to hear, and they each held onto the ironbough rails as the ship picked up speed. Beyond the rails, Roland watched as the edge of the rift became closer, and closer- Then the rift moved below the ship- the sense of weightlessness informed that they were indeed jumping over it. Roland stared down from between the rails. He couldn’t see the bottom of it even if he stared. What could’ve caused this anomaly, a worldwide one, at that?

As he struggled to come up with an answer, he felt his stomach flipping once more. A faceful of seawater as the ship landed neatly on the other side of the rift. “Blimey—” Tani yelled. “It worked! It flippin’ worked! That’s ridiculous!” The ship continued to sputter as it sailed against the currents. Roland stood up, walking to head below deck. Well, there shouldn’t be any worries about knocking heads on the ceiling now, right? He probably should go check if there were any misplaced-
Roland had just started down the stairs leading to the cabin when the ship lurched forward- his hand slipped on the stair rails. The lower rungs of the staircase quickly flew up to fill most of his vision.

“Huh?” He remembered saying before it hit him.

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Everything that happened afterwards went by in a haze- pain, alarmed shouting, the bitter taste of soreaway(maybe?), more shouting, dull aching in his feet as he was carried somewhere, then the feeling of fabric surrounding him. Then the ceiling came into focus and Roland found himself face up, lying in the cabin. He groaned quietly as he assessed himself. A sprained wrist from trying to stop the fall, a now-healed gash on his forehead that still hurt- did he manage to sprain both his ankles at the same time? Wow. He was lucky he hadn’t chipped a tooth or broke a rib. On hindsight, he should’ve waited until they were in calmer waters before moving.

He tried sitting up, wincing as his entire body objected to the movement. Guess there was only so many things the herb could fix at once. Closing his eyes and frowning, he brought his hand up to push his hair back.

Wait.

That didn’t feel like leather.

He opened his eyes and brought his right hand up to look. It was ungloved. The translucent patterns swirled lazily. Leander was manning the ship the last time he remembered.

They know.

He threw the blanket aside and sat up, ignoring the whirl of vertigo. Pain shot up his legs as he got ready to stand up-

“Don’t do that!” Someone had stepped off the last of the stairs and hurried closer. Leander. Hands pushed on his shoulders as Roland sat down on the bed again. “You’re going to-”

“They know, Leander. They know.” Leander looked down, quiet for a moment. “They do.”

“What’d you tell them? What-” He saw furrowed brows on the blonde man. “They didn’t ask me. I believe… they asked Lofty.” His vision blurred. A feeling of fingers dragging across his face as Roland rubbed it, staring at the planks on the ground. What could Lofty tell them? The extent of it? He had to be steady. One, two, three. His voice tumbled out as a whisper. “They’re upset, aren’t they?”

A pause. “Yes. They’ll still talking outside the cabin when I came in. Batu, especially.” Leander sighed. “I have a feeling that your… current physical condition is the only thing stopping them from confronting you right now.” There was a crushing feeling in his back. Like being backed up against a wall. ‘Roland. Look at me.” A hand guided him to look. “What’s the worst thing that would happen if they found out?”

He counted the weakly thundering, tearing feeling in his chest for a while before he pieced together the words, felt ready to answer. And even then, it disgusted him to say it. He reached his hand behind him to comb through his hair- they took off the ribbon sometime earlier- as he answered. “I’d be cast out of Evermore.”

Leander’s eyes softened. “And you believe that it would happen? That King Evan would allow that to happen?” The buzzing feeling in Roland’s head got lighter as he ruminated on the logic of it. His feet touched the floorboards again. “...maybe no.”
The Junior Consul nodded. “Then your worries lie elsewhere. Consider it while you recover- you need to prepare yourself for the confrontation, after all.” A sticky feeling was wiped off from the corner of Roland’s eye. “Lie down. Your feet will not get you anywhere if you refuse to let them heal.”

He listened, and as the Hydropolitan tugged on the blankets, he found a statement tugging similarly at his mind. “I don’t know how to… face them. Talk to them.” He admitted weakly. Leander looked at him, then did a gentle smile. “Follow your heart. Say what it wants to speak.”

Leander stayed in the cabin for a few more minutes, then left to check on the other three. Roland remembered to thank him before he left, answered with a quiet “Don’t think about it.”. He stared up at the ceiling as the waves echoed outside, sinking into fatigue.

He felt ages too young.

Chapter End Notes

I lied.

Thank you for reading Chapter 54! To be honest, knowing how well the first boat trip and confrontation went, I was dreading this one lol. At first the big tumble was meant to be just comic relief because the only other route was a big argument between the two adults, but then something matched up and the story took a turn for the angst. Again. At least we know something about Roland now. Someone bless Leander, oof. And with this we’ve broken through 80k, what an achievement.

P.S. Batu's the true dad figure here in this fic lol
It took the rest of the afternoon for Roland to piece himself together, as well as what he wanted to say. If anyone entered the cabin, anyway. He needed to apologize— he’d at least constructed one, but even as he recited it, it brought a bad taste into his mouth. He tried his best to resist the pit of unease in his stomach and the memories of the oh-so-many conferences where he had to memorize notecards’ worth of apologies and consequential answers.

When the sky turned orange outside, Batu entered the cabin.

The Cloud Snake walked to one of the beds and lifted the mattresses and pillows in one heave, then turned to bring them out of the room. Roland had to try.

“Batu—” “I’m takin’ these to the other cabin.” The cabin for storage? Then— “The kids need their space.” With that, the pirate walked up the stairs and out of sight. The pit expanded into a whirlpool. Steady, Roland. If they were all going to stay elsewhere, there were still two more mattresses to move. At least.

He pushed himself to sit upright on the bed and waited, reciting it again. He had to try.

Batu entered the cabin a second time— when he picked up another set of mattresses, Roland inhaled.

“Batu, I’m- I’m sorry.”

The older man’s movements paused, back turned. Roland couldn’t see his expression. Then a gruff voice. “The damage’s already been done, kid.” Roland could feel his blood turning cold.

Batu turned around, face set like a thundering stormcloud. “Why’d ye hide that from us all?” He had to try. “I… didn’t want to burden any of you with it.”

Something sparked in the pirate’s expression— anger, Roland recognised with a jolt— and the sky pirate lifted the mattresses onto his shoulder in controlled movements. He walked to the base of the stairs, then paused.

“Did ye ever think of Evermore as yer home, Roland?” With that question, Batu left the cabin for the second time. Roland moved some hair out of his sight. He had to be steady. He counted his breaths.

When Batu stomped down the stairs a third time, Roland spoke. “It’s because Evermore is my home that I have to keep it under wraps, Batu! I-” He saw the pirate pause. He had to at least convince someone …! “If anyone knows that one of the high-ranked officials is… is unwell, then I’ll just be a liability to Evermore. A weakness.” Two breaths to slow himself down. “You know Naverre’s trying to steal Kingsbonds. I can’t let myself be the reason…”

The Cloud Snake thudded closer. Roland’s eyes followed his movement— a pot of soreaway was shoved into his vision. “Eat.” He obeyed, plucking the leaves off the plant. The bitter taste made him wince. Meanwhile, Batu walked over to the beds. He stopped.

“Evan’s father died o’ bein’ slowly poisoned.” Batu said gruffly. A feeling of being hammered on the head. “The lad ne’er knew until he died. Ye should know ye’re putting him through the same
thing all o’er again.” The pirate picked up the third set of mattresses. “And ye know, he was still tryin’ to convince me that ye had yer reasons even when there were tears in his eyes. I would’ve thrown ye off the damned ship in a heartbeat if I didn’t have him to think about.”

Batu was leaving- air caught in Roland’s throat. “Batu- I’m sorry!” “It’s not me ye’re needin’ to apologise to.” The sound of footsteps on metal-like wood.

He was left alone in the cabin again, staring at the blanket. He’d… forgotten. Or chose to not remember. He couldn’t determine which one it was. Hands closed to grip on the fabric.

What had he done?

What could he tell Evan?

---

The rest of the trip passed in relative silence. Leander mentioned that the three still needed time to process, so Roland knew better than to leave the cabin and cause another uproar. There was still some storage of food and drink in the cabin he was in. He stuck to either trying to strengthen himself again once he stopped wobbling around the cabin, or practicing to handle magic in the meanwhile. And reading, as he did the last time. There was only one book in the arms ring- the diary. He’d forgotten he had a new page.

It was strange that this time, the page was written on both sides. Perhaps they were consecutive entries. He had remembered it word by word.

Entry 20916

_The court has been particularly critical of late. The ministers have been pulling my king aside to tell him what have gone wrong, and my king has returned to his room, head hung. Could my gut feeling be correct and the court was trying to deter my king from doing as his role requires? Or has my worry for my king led me to be paranoid and saw their attempts at giving advice as a threat?_

_My identity comes with consequences: one has only their own experience to fall back on, or to seek advice from other beings of power. But asking one of such sensitive matters would be to reveal the vulnerability of the nation I am in charge of, and this is dangerous._

Entry 20917

_Today, the financial minister had torn the report my king had written to shreds- and then proposed that he be in charge of drafting everything under finance. All the other co-leaders did the same, making excuses that everything would be too much for him. I managed to defuse the situation by telling them that the king is still learning, but this is a warning that the cabinet is indeed trying to make my king a puppet. I have gathered them and gave them a stern reminder to stop or face my wrath, but they said they were just worried for the king._

_What should I do? My head seems to have taken a dive into the clouds whenever I try to think of a solution. As painful as I must admit, the ages of a prosperous kingdom and a cooperative court have gotten to me._

It… felt almost familiar.

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On the sixth day of the trip, the ship leapt over another rift. On the ninth, the boat sputtered to a
stop, a dull thunk as it hit land.

Leander informed him that they had reached Autumnia, and Roland took the set of gloves from him, putting them on once he put on his coat and boots.

They went out of the cabin to see a wasteland of gears and piping, sour-smelling green waste. The other three stood near the side of the ship while Fawlon lowered the planks. There was an uncomfortable silence, until the board hit the rocky shore. Roland couldn't see Evan's expression—except that his ears were flattened against his head.

“Let’s go.” Batu said.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 55! Not a good time, my folks.

I have this headcanon that since the sky pirates are one big family where everyone adopts everyone, trust and sharing burdens is a big thing in the base, and not doing so is a big taboo. in contrast, in Roland's world(and in ours, unfortunately), weaknesses are just something to be used to drag someone out on, so that's the basis of Roland's answer.
Once they were clear of the toxic pool- “The stink’s gonna stick for ages, by yur!” Lofty said-, they could see that they were on an arid wasteland, huge gears and metal gadgets scattered in cracks in the land. Further away, a tower stood- almost like a metal tree with gears for leaves.

“The Treehouse… so that’s why they called it so.” Leander muttered.

Walking closer revealed it to be a lot larger than how it looked. A doorway at the base of it led into the interior-

“Beep! Visitors detected! Traces of wastewater detected!”

Immediately the six were blasted with some kind of aromatic smoke- when it cleared, they could see a robot, as tall as Evan, holding something that looked like a fire extinguisher. “What the flip-”

“Unidentified organism detected!”

A blast of irritating-smelling smoke obscured Lofty from view as the Kingmaker croaked. Leander took off his currently opaque and squinted at the robot while he cleaned it on his coat. “What is this strange creature?” The robot turned at him. “Beep! I’m a reception robot for visitors! There will be no tours today due to events, but cleansing functions are still available if required!” Leander grimaced. “Please don’t.”

The constructs in the Treehouse were primarily brass-colored, with houses jutting out of the sides. It was almost like a skyscraper, but several times wider and without the glass panels. Words rolled across the screen of the counter some distance in front of them; similar panels dotted, illuminated the surroundings. The place smelled of rusty water and smoke.

Seeing no further reaction from the visitors, the reception robot whirred and rolled away. Lofty hurled angry words at it, prompting a brief amused smile from Evan before something else caught his attention.

“Hey! It’s going to start soon!” A voice called from to their right, and the five’s gazes followed the source to two men, the former of which had called out to the other. “Yeah, the Anti-Vector demonstration up at the landing pad, I know.” The other scratched his head. “Let’s just go get some scoops on that, yeah?

“Vector…” Evan muttered as the two men turned away and walked up the stairs together. “We should head there. Maybe that’s our chance to meet Zip Vector.” “Then we better follow them.” Tani answered, “I’m barely able to wrap my head around this place- we’re going to get lost if we try to find our way ourselves.”

They followed the two men into an escalator, where another one of the robots stood. “Bring us to uptown.” One of the Broadleaf residents said, then turned around. “You going anywhere? Midtown?” “Oh, uptown is fine.” Evan answered, which prompted the older men to frown. “You sure, kid? There’s gonna be a protest up there.” “Y-yeah! I want to get an idea of what’s going on in Broadleaf.” “Alright, whatever. Just don’t side yourselves with a faction- the place’s split into pro-Zip and anti-Zip. Tensions being high, something like that.”

The whirring of gears below them, and the platform moved upwards.
The path led through some kind of greenhouse, then winded up stairs. A metal hangar stretched out from the top of it. Once they had marched their way up, they could see a group of people gathered in the space between the hangar and a glass chute- must be another escalator.

“It’s almost time, Bracken.” One of the men stated to a woman in yellow, who nodded before answering. “All right. We’d better start by thanking everyone for coming…”

The woman looked to the left- at the five. “Huh.” She jogged over, the man following close behind. “You don’t look like you’re from Broadleaf.” “You’d better leave-” The man added. “It might get dangerous around here.”

“Ah… but we were hoping to meet with President Vector.” Evan asked. Bracken crossed her arms. “I don’t think that’s going to happen… Anyway, I’m Bracken Meadows, Chief Engineer here at Broadleaf Industries. I’m the organizer of this protest. Today, we’re going to try to make President Vector finally listen to what we have to say- what the people this company relies on has to say.”

“He hasn’t been the same since we started developing the perpetual fission reactor.” The protester next to Bracken explained. “He doesn’t care about anything but finishing the damn thing. Not even his employees’ lives! Something like twenty people already collapsed from overwork! The conditions here are unacceptable!”

A rattling of metal. “Oi, Bracken! The President’s here!” A voice called from further ahead, and the two protest leaders turned around. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

The suspended space in front of the hangar whirred close, then the wall on the other side of the building opened up- revealing an airship… decorated with a giant gold-colored head with a bob cut. Tani was quick to voice her disgust at it, while Bracken walked towards the group of fellow protesters. “Let’s do this! We can make President Vector listen! Trey, get the megaphone out.”

The man who had been greeting the group raised a mike to his mouth. “For too long, the President has been working us like slaves to get his reactor finished! But we have a message for him!” Trey took a breath. “We are NOT your slaves, Zip!”

The protest exploded in similar yells- demands for worker rights, fair treatment, the halt of the reactor project, no more overtime. The airship hovered in the air, the golden face unmoved by the protest. Then a magenta gleam from where the deck would be on the airship, to most of the protesters’ confusion. “Yoy, this ain’t good, mun!” Lofty shouted, and Evan frowned. “What do you mean?” The air on the closed metal panels rippled. “That’s a Kingmaker summoning!”

A huge metal claw- as wide as the entire crowd of people came slamming down on the hangar, and the protesters scattered among screams. The empty space between the airship and the protesters fell away to reveal a heavily armored, four legged creature that hulked a few many times over them, then roared.

“Bastion…” Bracken muttered, then picked up the megaphone Trey had dropped in the chaos. A crackling sound echoed around the Treehouse interior- the sound of a mic buzzing to life, then a man’s voice could be heard.

“Now you see what happens to people who defy me!” A laugh. Bracken’s frown deepened, and she spoke into the loudspeaker. “Finally decided to make an appearance, huh, President?!” “What a disappointment to see you leading this ragtag resistance.” A condescending snort from the speakers overhead. “You know, I expected better from you, Bracken.” “And I expected more from you too!”
Bracken yelled. “Have you forgotten what we said when we started out? We promised to make the world a better place, remember?”

“And we will!” Zip declared. “The perpetual fission reactor will change the world forever- And the future shall be mine to define!” “By trampling over everyone who helped you make it this far?” Bracken replied. “You used to care about us, Zip! You used to be a leader we could trust…” She breathed in. “But that’s all gone- Now it’s all progress, no matter the cost! When did you get so broken, Zip?”

“Broken? Me? Ha!” Zip’s voice was laced with contempt. “You’re the ones broken! Left in the pas-”

“Enough.” A low voice had cut the Broadleaf president off- then Zip screamed. Evan’s eyes widened in recognition. “I know that voice- that’s Naverre!” “Which means we’re too late.” Lofty added, “That metal giant’s gonna blow, by yur!”

Batu turned to Bracken, who watched in alarm as Bastion reared up and roared, electricity fizzling around it. “We gotta run, lass! Things’s goin’ to get messy fast!” “What-” A bolt struck the glass panels above them, and Bracken nodded. “You- you’re right. This way!”

Before they ran into one of the metal doors- Trey held it open for them- Zip’s voice could still be heard. “How… how dare you disobey me, Bastion?!”

Chapter End Notes

Naverre voice: ok shut the heck up

Thank you for reading Chapter 56! We’ll be doing this arc a bit differently, if yall already saw what changed. Also!! This fic has gone past 2000 hits!! Thank you so much for the continued support aaa I'll do my best to deliver the chapters!
Trey had just told the Evermore crew to sit down when a boom resounded outside. Bracken raised her eyebrows and ran to a set of computers in the side of the room. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, and the screen buzzed and lit up.

“Oh… oh boy.” She could only manage. “What’s happenin’?” Batu asked, and Bracken looked closer at the screen. “It seems like… Yeah, that’s got to be it- Zip’s fighting Bastion!”

“Fighting a-” Leander pushed up his glasses. “How, exactly?” “The airship’s armed with cannons, and Zip’s got a smartstick.” The Chief Engineer tapped on the keyboard again. “He’s… removing the limiters-

“ANYTHING WHO STANDS IN MY WAY GETS ATOMIZED!” Zip’s voice could be heard outside, then a floor-shaking boom caused the room they were in to briefly dive into darkness, with only emergency lights and the computer screens providing dim illumination. Two mutters of spells, and additional light was provided from the two magicians’ wands.

“Bracken!” Trey shouted, and in the light from the monitors, the pink-haired engineer moved over. “The airship…” The rumbling came to a stop, and the lights came on again. Bracken sighed. “Looks like Bastion’s gone… and the place’s in shambles. Yikes.” She turned around as the lamps flickered to life once again. “You said you were…” The engineer frowned, then glanced at the visitors. “Uh, is everything alright? There’s almost a rain cloud forming in here.”

It didn’t take long for Lofty to pick up on the uncomfortable atmosphere in the room and jump onto the seats onto the side. Evan walked towards Bracken while the others sat on the seats, with Lofty in the middle. “I don’t think I’ve introduced myself yet, Miss Meadows. I’m Evan Pettiwhisker Tildrum, king of Evermore- a kingdom in the Heartlands. We intended to ask President Zip Vector to sign a pact of peace and join our union of friendly nations… but I guess it won’t be that easy.”

“Evermore… I’ve heard.” Bracken clapped her hands, then frowned. “Goldpaw and Hydropolis’ve already signed up. And you’re right, it won’t be easy.” “President Vector didn’t use to be like that.” Trey took off his hat as he continued, “Bracken and me- we founded this whole company with him. We know him better than anyone else, and ever since we started on the perpetual fission reactor, he’s been different.”

“It’s got to be Naverre’s doing.” Evan said. “I doubt he shows up looking like a robed, snake-masked sorcerer to any of you, but he’s been stealing Kingsbonds from the leaders around the world. From how Bastion turned on its king, I believe he did the same to President Vector by… polluting his mind, in short.”

“By your logic… does that means we have to get that pollution out of Zip’s mind?” Bracken asked, and Leander stood up. “Precisely, but there are… complications. From what we have seen and heard, the President may be seriously infected by Naverre’s influence. In Hydropolis’s case, Brineskimmer has gifted its humanfolk with magical aptitude, so Queen Nerea had stronger resistance to the darkness and could be restored to her senses quickly. As for the President…” He pushed up his glasses. “I doubt it will be as easy as just calling his name.”

The room was quiet for a while while they pondered. Then Evan looked up, hand on his chin. “If
President Vector changed… is there any way remind him of how he used to be?” “A memory jog of the good old times, you mean?” Bracken nodded. “Actually, there is. Will take a bit of a search, but that’s a place to start.” She looked down a corridor that led further into the room. “We’ll start here.”

---

The corridor led into a small, simple office with tables to the side and a simple blueprint hung up on the wall.

“This is the first office we used—” Bracken ran her hand over the graph. “It’s a bit small when you compare them to the offices we have now, but this is where everything that became Broadleaf Industries began. It was Zip’s idea that we leave the office as it was when we moved up. So we’d never forget our origins.” “And he recorded every minute of it- the guy was obsessed!” Trey was opening the drawers under the desk as he spoke.

“How, exactly?” Leander prompted. “Well, we have surveillance cameras set up around the place.” Trey avoided knocking his head on the edge of the table and started looking among the shelves. “Zip’d delete most of the footage- privacy and work secrets at stake, after all- but on request, we can store some of them in memoliths. And… eureka.”

The Broadleafer tugged out a thin board of glass, topped by a brass casing. “Here’s one of the older models, but this should be the right memolith.” “Memo…?” Evan frowned. “Memolith. Thanks, Trey.” Bracken took the memolith from Trey, wiping dust off the device. “You take a crystal, run a magical current through it to record things. Memoliths work by passing a light beam through the crystal and then focusing the data into audio and visual forms with prism lens. You’d be able to watch the memory whenever you want to as long as both of these components are functional.”

“Uh.” Tani managed, and Bracken coughed. “Well, in layman’s terms, you use it to record memories. Let’s see.” She held the panel horizontally, turned a knob on the memolith, and with a snap, light fanned out above the device.

What came out was a conversation- between Zip and Bracken, from the voices. The clacking of a typewriter in the background. A brief enquiry from Zip on a circuit, and Bracken had taken it to improve later. “Thanks!” Zip had said, “I can’t wait to get the crystal battery up and running- this thing’s going to be a game-changer for the energy business! The technology we build here will make a better tomorrow for everyone. I can feel it!”

The light fizzled and the memolith became idle. “Oh… wow.” Bracken muttered, eyes widened in shock. “This is… way back from the start. Visual’s a bit corrupted, but this will do.” She put away the memolith, and took out a bigger tablet, poking around on it. “Problem’s whether just one will be enough- I’ll search for any other memoliths that hadn’t been wiped yet…” A beep from the tablet. “Aha. There’s four unaccounted for- including the one we have. And since most of our work happened in the factory…”

“You’ll have to go to the factory.” Trey put his hat back on. “Guess it’ll be up to me to calm our fellow workers down, then, Bracken?” “Yes, thank you. I’m counting on you, Trey.” The tablet Bracken was holding disappeared in a flash of light, and the Chief Engineer walked towards the door.

“Wait, Miss Meadows!” Evan hurried after her. “Let us come with you! We want to free President Vector too!” Bracken blinked, then nodded. “Of course- thank you for helping me out! Please, call me Bracken.”

---
The glass construct next to the hangar was the escalator to the factory.

“BZZT! FACTORY SECURITY LEVELS AT FIVE: AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY!” Bracken sighed as the robot as it finished blasting its warning. “Should’ve expected this.” She cracked her knuckles. “Look away, won’tcha?”

They did, and after a loud clang, the robot spun. “Welcome, fellow workers, bzzt! Here’s to another great day at Broadleaf i-n-c! Just say the word if you need the elevator!” “There we go.” Bracken said. “Just gotta whack them on the head to fix them. Come on, we’ve got memoliths to seek out.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 57! We're kinda in a plot-tight spot over here: I'll see what I can do.

Here’s a tiny bit of headcanon that Brineskimmer granted its people with better magic because normally it's just lazing around the entire sea.
“Oi… so how are we goin’ to look for those memory stone things if they’re that small?” Batu asked while they were in the lift. “Good question- people do tend to lose them now and then. So when we started producing memoliths in mass, we’ve also built an app to scan the vicinity for any that might’ve been displaced. Once we match them up to the serial numbers in the database…” She looked up to see the rest of the group staring at her. “I’m confusing you guys, aren’t I?”

The lift doors clanked open, and they stepped out into a dimly lit chamber- Bracken took out a flashlight and turned it on. Evan and Leander cast their light spells to contribute. A beep from the tablet, and Bracken looked closely. “There’s one from the archives on the other side of this floor. We still need to reanimate the boilers to get there, though…” She handed the flashlight to Tani, and hummed as she checked the tablet again. “Alright, I’ve got the map- I’ll bring you to it.”

---

“You mean to say the entire floor- and by extension, this factory- is a puzzle in its literal sense?” Leander asked, taking off his glasses in incredulity while they neared a cauldron-like apparatus that overlooked the place. Now that they could see from a distance, they saw that the floor were a series of half-gears, some of them held by transparent pillars. “In addition, to get to the offices, we are supposed to solve these puzzles?”

“Yeah.” Bracken checked the boiler. “Zip wanted only the wittiest people to find their way into the place- if I weren’t here, you’d be expected to figure out the map and how to solve the puzzle yourselves.” Leander looked up from rubbing his eyes. “…that’s absurd.” Bracken stepped back and took out a whistle. “True.”

She did a series of pipping sounds on the whistle, and soon a red dot appeared where the lift was, floating closer to reveal it was a Fire Higgledie with a small gear for a necklace. Bracken grinned as the engineer and the Higgledie did a quick fist bump. “Howtcha doin’, bud?” The Higgledie floated over to the boiler, and with an audible snap, the entrance of the boiler burst into flames, lighting the surroundings. Evan gave a small yelp, and the red Higgledie seemed to giggle. “He’s friendly. Say hello to Pyrite!”

Kettle- the Fire Higgledie assigned to Batu and Tani- flew over to Pyrite, and with a chirrup, they both combusted- into growing balls of fire. Bracken blinked, and hurried over. “Stop it, you’re going to overheat the-”

A small orb of gravity whacked both of the Higgledies out of their showoff, and the five looked over to Toby, who sighed and settled once again. Bracken crossed her arms, hiding a grin while Pyrite chirruped at her. The transparent pillars flared in light as an arc of electricity flowed through the center.

“You see the glowing pillars?” Bracken instructed. “There’s a button over there that changes the… locations of the half-gears. You’ll be able to find your way to the archive from there.”

---
“Man, this Zip guy’s got a thing for the dramatic.” Tani sighed, stepping into the archive then noticing the relatively dusty room. “And this place is a mess.” “Guilty as charged. Well—” Bracken looked between the round tables of computers. “—when our main office moved up, this became the place where we dumped our old records. Let’s start looking for the memolith, yeah?”

A few minutes later, the sharp-eyed pirate girl noticed the slip of glass hidden between the books on the shelves and took it out, waving it in the air. “Ay, Bracken, I got it!”

The six gathered around as Bracken turned on the memolith. This time, an image of Trey pushing a trolley of hand grapplers and other gadgets to a shocked Zip and Bracken fizzled into view.

“Zip! The launch was a disaster! Everyone hates it! Half of the products we shipped were returned!” Trey yelled. Zip stood up from his seat. “What? Why? My design was perfect!” “Man… oh man, this is the end for us, isn’t it? I’m sorry, Zip…” “Don’t say that just yet, Trey! Only half of them were returned, right? That means half of them were liked! So stop whining and start thinking! This isn’t the end—it’s just the beginning! The world will see our vision one day, and we’re not giving up until that day comes!”

“It was a tough day.” Bracken tucked away the memolith. “We nearly went under there and then… I still remember sitting up crying all night long. But nobody did more to get us back on our feet but Zip. He was an inspiration…”

A beep from the tablet Pyrite was holding, and Bracken looked while the Higgledie held it up, stretching her arms. “Alright, we’ve got a signal from the next level up: that’s the smartstick lab.” “Smart stick—ye can explain later.” Batu had resigned to not understanding Broadleaf words.

“Oh yeah!” Bracken tapped her forehead as she remembered something. “Just a word of warning, the puzzles are going to get harder from here on.”

A moment of silence, then Evan frowned and put his hand on his chin. “What do you mean?” “Well, it’s going to get harder. I can’t exactly put it into words, but you remember what I said about Zip wanting to seek the smartest of the smart, yeah? The puzzle we just went through’s just the beginning of it.”

“Huh.” Leander pushed up his glasses. “I’m curious: how hard will it get?”

---

“You’re— you’re saying we have to control two colors now?” Leander looked up from rubbing his eyes, exasperation apparent. “And each color has their own set of cogs? And boilers?” Bracken nodded, looking a bit empathetic.

The Junior Consul of Evermore started rubbing his eyes again. Tani gave an awkward grin. “And if Bracken wasn’t here, we’re supposed to figure out everything by ourselves… We’re only seeing a glimpse of the sheer frustration every single Broadleafer was put through.” The engineer raised her hands in defeat. “Well, you’re not wrong there— I’ve gone through this quite a few times and I still haven’t memorised the steps to solving it.”

Leander put his glasses back on. There was a hint of determination in his expression. “Very well. Let us see how we’re supposed to go around this.” As the Hydropolitan walked further into the floor, Batu shrugged and scratched his head. “Huh. Seems like our Junior Consul found himself a challenge.” The Cloud Snake smirked. “Well, he needs it. Let’s go.”
Thank you for reading Chapter 58! Boy I sure made things harder for myself when I chose to start using Broadleaf’s naming scheme instead of the usual letter theme I went with for the previous arcs haha.

Apparently Bracken's gotten a verbal tic of ending her questions with 'yeah?'”, but I guess it does help to let her stick out, ha. Managing six people's speech at once is a thing.

Leander being a bit more passionate about puzzles that make everyone's head ache is a thing as well, apparently. He kinda does need 1. the stress relief and 2. also an outlet for his renewed zest for life, ha. Still, I'm going to skip the actual puzzle solving sections because gosh, I can't even remember what I did in this section.
Filling in BL-anks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They had managed to activate both boilers when a trilling beep could be heard from somewhere. Bracken blinked, then held her hand up to her mouth after pressing somewhere on her glove.

“Password?” The six listened to a series of taps- Morse code, it seemed. Then a person’s voice came from the glove, hushed and fast. “Bracken, what are you doing in the lower floors? I thought you’re going to confront Zip.” “We need a bit of evidence to back us up. Anything happened in the Treehouse?” “Well, yes. Zip’s been notified of your presence. I’ll try to stall and send as few as I can, and so will some of the pro-Zips, but… just expect them to start showing up, yeah?” “Gotcha. Thanks, Marly.” “Good luck finding your evidence.”

Bracken tapped on the glove, frowning. “Who was that?” Evan asked. “A mole, kind of.” The engineer adjusted her goggles. “Anyway, we’ll be getting company. You all can fight, right?” “Can you?” Tani asked, and Bracken summoned a mallet. “I’ve got a couple of other tricks up my sleeve, but our best bet is trying to find all four memoliths before they find us, yeah?” “Who’s they?” Batu asked. “Security bots. We developed them while we were working on improving Bastion.” Bracken let the mallet disappear. “And ouch, do they pack a punch if they hit you.”

Tani half-ran to the base of the stairs. “In that case we’d better catch up to Leander- he’s gone on ahead. I don’t like the sound of these bots.”

---

With some backtracking, they were able to move past the gears- and up dangerously unrailed stairs. Beyond them, clouds moved along the blue sky.

Evan tried peeking over the stairs, then stepped back, yelping. “We’re so high up! Won’t it be dangerous for the Broadleafers?” “Well, normally we’d stick to the interior, but…” A whirring sound from above the staircase, and Bracken summoned her mallet as she continued. “You’re absolutely right. I’ll try to implement safety measures once we’re done bringing Zip back. And fighting these bots.”

The fight was more like a scramble to not be pushed to the edge as they slowly separated the two bots. Batu, Bracken and Evan moved further up the stairs, pushing back one of them. A lash of electricity magic from Tani immobilized the other, a Gorgon’s Needle unbalanced it, and a gravity bullet propelled it off the edge. The three hurried up the stairs only to see the Cloud Snake and the chief engineer bumping fists over a completely pummeled, mostly smoking, partially flattened chunk of metal. Evan waved sheepishly from beside them.

“Well…” Tani commented. “I guess mallets work best against metal?”

Once they had double-checked their stores of soreaways and sixth sensors with each other, they made their way along a suspended walkway (“Yeah, definitely getting the safety fences in someday.” Bracken repeated.) to the smartstick lab: a glass-paneled office with a round table of monitors and levers on the side. Evan peeked in one of them, then blinked. “Is that…” He reached his fingers into the gap between the levers. “Hm…” Evan peeked again, a spark of light magic forming overhead.

There was a glint of brass from further down the gap. “Found anything, Evan lad?” Batu marched
over, and the young king looked up. “Yeah… but I think it’s stuck.” The memolith was wider at the base. It probably fell in the gap and got dragged down by its weight. Which meant… “Let me try again.” Evan reached into the crack again. A creaking- a scraping sound, then Evan’s face lit up. “Ah! I got it.” He pulled out the memolith- thankfully unscratched. The six gathered again while Bracken checked if it was in working order, then turned it on.

Cheers erupted from the memolith. An image of Zip holding up a stick-like apparatus triumphantly, with more Broadleafers surrounding him. Trey was sobbing. “Behold! The all-singing, all-dancing smartstick!” Zip announced. “With one of these revolutionary devices, anyone can be a wizard! No more magic monopoly for the casting classes!” A pause, then the man took on a warmer tone. “And I couldn’t have done it without you guys. This was a team effort- don’t forget that. I know I won’t. Thank you, all of you!”

As the memolith became idle, Batu crossed his arms. “So that’s why ye all said Zip didn’t used to be like that.” “Yeah.” Bracken looked down at the memolith. “We were a team… we all wanted the same thing. But… I didn’t even notice when he started… when everything started going wrong.”

A sound outside made everyone look up. “That came from upstairs.” Bracken frowned. “Could it be the reactor…? We’d best hurry- the next memolith’s in the production lines.”

---

Hurrying was a problem in itself. They were now heading into confidential areas, so it was only natural that the security be spectacularly tight.

“Three lock switches, all in different parts of the floor… and two colors of gears…” Evan recounted, then held his head with his hands with a dramatic flair. “Ah- it’s getting too much for me to think!” “So our first step will be confirming the positions of the switches.” Leander pushed his glasses up. “Miss Bracken, the map, please?”

A minute later, Tani jumped onto a platform with a boost from Batu. A light bulb lit up from the other side of the room, and Bracken clapped her hands as the pirate girl landed. “That’s a nice bypass.” Batu huffed. “If ye just did it like me ‘nd Cloudcoil ‘nd just went with two planks a latch, ye wouldn’t need all these darned contrivances or contraptions.” The pink-haired engineer frowned. “That… doesn’t sound secure.”

At Bracken’s mutter, Evan joined the conversation. “They did try to throw people off cliffs for setting foot in the canyon, so that kept prying eyes away, right?” “Yup!” Tani grinned, and the chief engineer blinked. “Did I-” “Excuse me!” Leander had marched over, holding the tablet. “There’s a slight problem with this t- item.” Bracken took it. “Oh, it’s just idle. Hold it here, and…” The screen lit up again. “Voila.”

“He’s actually really into these flipping puzzles and all.” Tani commented while the Hydropolitan practically ran in the direction he came from. “Let’s try to not let him get all the credit.” With that, they hurried after the bespectacled man yet again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 59! We're halfway through this heckhole, and finally some damn interaction. oof.
Marly was one of the originally pro-Zip engineers who decided to help out Bracken and the anti-Zip workers when she couldn't stand the state of the company.

I was thinking that if the bots were fully metal, swords and lances wouldn't work as well against them, so there was what I did with the fighting scene, ha.
“Do you need some rocket fuel after all that puzzle-solving, Mr. Aristides?” ”Leander is fine- hm. Rocket... fuel?”

As the doors closed behind them, Leander observed the bottle of beverage with apprehension. Then he sipped it. And promptly winced. “What... what is this, may I ask?” “Rocket fuel- it’s an energy drink. It gives you the amount of sugar needed for picking yourself up with minimum time.” “It’s bitter and spicy at the same time.” “Oh, that’s the caffeine- you know how tea or coffee wakes you up, right? And the extra ingredients for the wake-up shock.” “I...” Leander looked at the bottle again, likely unaware of the scrunched grimace he was making as he stored it away in his arms band. “I’ll try to get used to the taste.”

“And we’ve found it!” The sky pirates waved from above the platform the stairs led up to. “Come over here!” It had fallen under the counter, so Bracken dusted it off before turning it on. This time, it looked like Zip was addressing a crowd of Broadleafers in front of the main building. The footage seemed recent- Bracken, who was standing to the side, was in the outfit she was currently in.

The Broadleaf president raised his arms to shush the crowd. “Okay, okay! Listen, everybody! We’ve brought a string of hit products that’ve changed the world forever to market!” The camera panned up to show the tower. “And thanks to all of your hard work, we’ve built this too- our revolutionary new campus, the Treehouse! What’s more, we’ve gotten our three hundred and five thousand, six hundred and thirty-ninth team member! We’re not a company- we’re a nation in our own right! Soon we’ll will be the largest and the best the world has ever seen!” The speaker popped once from the loud cheers, and Zip raised his hands again. “Just one last push! Are you with me?” The Broadleafers roared in support. “Yeah! We’re with you, Zip!” It was followed up with united cries of the Broadleaf president’s surname, then the footage clicked and ended.

Bracken held a nostalgic smile as she stored the memolith. “What a day. A company that started out in a shack got big enough to build this place- to become an actual country!” The smile faded. “He had a vision for the Treehouse: that people would live happy and work happy. And darn it if he didn’t do exactly that! So where did the old Zip go...”

The Cloud Snake patted the engineer on the shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. “We’ll get him back- we got all four of the memoliths, right?” Bracken nodded after a moment of thought. “You’re right. Well, there’s... one more I’d like to show him, actually.” Evan frowned as he asked, “Didn’t you say there were four?” “Yes, but they were... state-owned memoliths. This one’s a personal record. We’ll have to get to my office for that.”

---

The Chief Engineer’s office was a simple brass room with a working table and windows on the far end and a bed on the near end, on the left. Bracken turned right to unlock a safe, and after rummaging around, took out a memolith. “Yes, this is my office.” She commented. “I work here. And sleep... sometimes.” She shrugged. “Feels like I haven’t been here in a long time...”

“What’s in the memolith?” Evan asked, and Bracken smiled as she answered, “Well, uh, it’s... I guess you can say it contains one of the most important memories in my whole life.” “Golly... I won’t ask, then.” “Heh. You’ll see soon enough. Anyhow, I’m confident that this should be more
than enough to get Zip back. The lift to the reactor control room's just outside the office.”

When they got to said lift, sirens began to blare in the room. Bracken looked up, alarmed, then promptly began pushing everyone into the lift. “What’s happening, Bracken?” One of them asked amidst the confusion and the sirens. “Zip’s sending the ‘obliterator’!” The engineer slapped the close button multiple times. “Come on, close already!”

They could see a steel-grey orb clunking onto the factory floor as the lift doors closed. Bracken issued a loud sigh of relief as the lift began to clank upwards. “Obliterator?” Tani asked as an afterthought. “Our most advanced model in the line of security bots, still in production. It’s protocol for a siren to be used whenever one is sent out for testing to get everyone to get the hell into any rooms they can find and close the doors.” Bracken grimaced. “We’re still trying to tune down its aggressiveness, but.” A rumble came from below. “That’s something only the bots can do at the moment.”

Now that the sirens were diminishing in volume, elevator music played quietly as they continued moving up. After some glancing from Bracken, the Cloud Snake coughed. “So. Have you thought about what you’re going to tell Pres- Vector?” The engineer nodded. “Yes.” “In the worst scenario, I have repelling magic.” Leander proposed. “Thank you, Leander.”

With a ding and a cheerful ‘We have reached your destination!’ , the lift doors opened. Above a set of monitors, purple lights travelled through a sphere-like apparatus, connected on each side by a large glass tube, as well as various other cables. In front of the six, Zip worked feverishly at one of the computers.

Bracken stepped forward. “Zip! We need to talk!” The Broadleaf president continued to type, then to their relief, turned around. “Gah. Really, Bracken?” Zip huffed. “Makes sense that you’re the intruders, though. Who else would’ve gotten around my security but you, right?” “I want you to take a good look at these memoliths, Zip.” Bracken took out the first memolith. “Take a trip down memory lane.”

To the side, Leander took out his wand, whispering an incantation. The audio began to play, and Zip blinked, raising his eyebrows. Bracken handed the memoloth to Evan, then took out the next one. “Wh-” Zip managed while he listened to his past self and his claims of a grander future for all. The third one began to play, and the confusion in the bob-haired man turned into… shock. When the fourth one- the one where past Zip congratulated his people on the building of the Treehouse-clicked shut, Zip shook his head. “I was… why was I- I don’t…”

“It’s working!” Evan whispered as he put away the four memoliths, and Bracken nodded. “There’s one last memory I want to show you, Zip.” She took out the fifth and final memolith. “Please, you have to come back to us. Remember who you used to be.” The memolith turned on.

Chapter End Notes

The rocket fuel's going to get the same treatment as that double-strength tea from really, really long ago: buried in the arms band never to be brought out again. Leander's too polite to throw it away right away, ha.

Thank you for reading Chapter 60! I can't believe we're at 60 chapters already. I'm still pulling my boss-skipping skills out here, so that's good lol.
We're almost at *that* fight that I still haven't beaten yet, but I'm kinda hyped to finish writing it. Sit tight, folks!
The most important memory

From the holograph, Zip was holding something, offering it to a distraught Bracken sitting on a bed. “So, I stayed up all night making this for you…” He raised it- it was a prosthetic leg. “How about it? A custom leg made just for you by the world’s greatest engineer- you’re going to love it!” Bracken looked up, and with a fling of her arm, the prosthetic clattered across the floor. “This isn’t my leg! I want my leg!” Her voice trembled, then she curled up. “I want my…”

Past-Zip picked up the prosthetic before returning to Bracken’s side. “I… I get it, Bracken. I get that you’re upset, but…” He offered the metal leg again. “We’re engineers. We solve humanity’s problems- use technology to help people. That’s our purpose- that’s what we do. Are you going to let something like this to stop you from fulfilling this purpose?” The pink-haired woman looked up. “I…” “We solve humanity’s problems, and we solve each other’s problems. You lose a leg, I make you a new one. I lose a hand.” Zip coughed. “Well, I’m hoping you’d do the same for me.” Bracken smiled at that, and Zip offered it a third time. “Here, sit up. I’ll fit it on for you.”

At first, Bracken wiggled the ankle. Then she tried a few kicks. Then she stood up, carefully balancing herself, awe filling her expression with every passing second. “Thank you, Zip…” “Hey, I’m your boss. This is my job.”

With a sound, the memolith turned off. Purple wisps were escaping from the president, who stammered. “I…” “Look at it, Zip!” Bracken took off the boot from her right leg, then pulled up the trousers’ sleeve to reveal the same prosthetic that had been in the recording. “You know what we can do these days. I could’ve upgraded this. I could’ve gotten rid of the leg you made me, but I would never do it. This leg- this leg is what gave me the courage to carry on: what got me to where I am today.”

The purple wisps leaving Zip were increasing in intensity. Bracken stepped forward. “You were the best engineer, the best boss, the best friend anyone could have- you have a good heart! The best heart! You have to remember, Zip!” That was the breaking point- the aura that had surrounded Zip burst and flared out from the president while he yelled. “Hm.” Leander muttered, nodding, and put away his wand.

“Wh- I remember now... everything…” Zip gasped, clutching his head. “What have I done?” “Zip…?” Bracken cautiously moved closer. “That’s you, right? The real you…” “Bracken…” Zip straightened up. “I’m… I’m so sorry. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have remembered.”

A boom, and the entire room shook the group out of the happy reunion. Zip turned around and within a few clicks, a image replaced the codes on the screen. “Bastion’s online- it’s attacking the top floors!” He reported. “It’s- oh darn…” Another boom. “This is bad. If he reaches the reactor, he could trigger a total meltdown. And Broadleaf- and everything around it would be gone in an instant.” A memory of a missile flying past a car. A earth-shattering boom- the sight of a plume of fiery hell, the heat, the pain, the feeling of tar and oil and asphalt melting skin -
And then Roland was aware. It felt as though he'd opened the floodgates of something, and everything had rushed in full force into his chest. He took a shaky breath.

“We have to stop him!” Evan was saying, but Zip shook his head. “You’ll have to find him first- Bastion is equipped with full optical camouflage. I can’t detect him on my monitors, but judging by the patterns, he should be on the top of the tower. Come here.” Leander had stepped closer, but Roland shook his head, watching as Zip handed Evan something. “This is a transmitter, there’s a camera I can see through. Press the button here, we’ll be able to talk to each other through this.”

“The elevator’s this way.” Bracken had walked past the group. “Come on!”

They hurried after her, but before them the remains of an elevator- debris from the explosion had covered most of it. A hole had been blasted through the wall in front of them, revealing multiple wires and a blue sky. The transmitter Evan had fitted on his cape buzzed, and Zip spoke through it. “The elevator’s not working?” “No, Zip!” Bracken shouted. “This is our only elevator- we can’t get to the roof without it!” “Calm down- there has to be a way up! Windwhipper?” Evan suggested. Tani tapped her chin. “No, there’s no prop-leafed clovers here- there won’t be enough wind…”

“I’ve got it.” Zip’s voice came over the transmitter. “If we divert enough power into the high-pressure inlets, it might generate a field of sufficient integrity to-” “A pattern G chain reaction?” Bracken responded. “Yes, Bracken. And with that, we can turn light into solid matter: to make stairs to the top!” A pause, and Zip continued over the transmitter. “Yes, I know, it’s a hypothesis, but it’ll have to do- attention, all team members!”

He seemed to be talking to the Broadleafers who had returned to the room. “I need you to channel all available power into the reactor’s high-pressure inlets, right now!” “But president, they weren’t designed to withstand energy of this intensity! You know what will happen after that!” “Yes, of course. The reactor will go critical, the core will fuse, and we’ll end up with the world’s priciest piece of junk.”

“Wait, Zip- are you sure?” Bracken called towards the transmitter. “The reactor: she’s your baby.” There were already the tapping sounds from the other end. “It’s this or risking the lives of every person in this country.” Zip replied, “You think I’d hesitate for one second?” A whirring sound in the background. “I’m the Executive Director of this company, and the leader of this nation- nothing is more important than my people. So we’ll flood the tubes, damn it!”

The whirring sound was loud enough for them to hear even outside the room. Specks of light began to gather where the edge of the escalator was- then gathered to form stairs. Actual steps of stairs. “It’s working, President Vector!” Evan called into the transmitter. “Great! Now get up there!” As they hurried up the stairs, voices continued to come through- Zip was talking to his fellow engineers. “Good work, everyone! Now get the people somewhere safe! There should be bunkers in the lower levels!” “But president- it’s totally critical! Totally unstable! If we leave now-” “Who’d you think you’re talking to? If there’s anyone who can keep that thing under control, it’s me!” “But Mr. President, on your own?” “Sure, on my own- I can do it with my eyes closed. Now hurry up and get out of here!” “Yes, Mr. President! Good luck!”

The roof was in sight. “Alright.” Zip’s voice came through the transmitter again. “If I get a single foot wrong it’ll be goodnight for us all- but I won’t.” They stepped onto the metal platform. “Go shut down Bastion, yeah?”

The six gathered on the top of the tower. Bracken hurried forward. “He’s got to be around somewhere-” Lightning flashed around the platform. The air in front of them rippled, and Bastion stepped out of it, eyes glowing red. The armored beast reared up, then roared, the purple aura they had seen twice now covered their view, signalling the fight against the Realmwrecker.
He's back, boys!

Thank you for reading Chapter 61! I guess I should try explaining stuff. As from last chapter's comments, Roland's been in a Heroic BSOD(description: https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HeroicBSOD) since after his conversation with Batu in Chapter 55, and 9 days in the plot if we round it up. The memory of the nuke was what snapped him(mostly) out of it, but he hasn't been able to get a word in with how things got critical fast, haha. The others know that he was in a slump, but 1. they don't really know what to do about it and 2. Broadleaf happened so there wasn't too much time to catch their breath, so they've stuck with awkwardly not bringing it up. You'll see why I pulled this trope soon.

Honestly this part of the plot was... pretty good? I think.

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Update August 11 2019: I've given it some thought and figured I might've wanted to give an impression of being so ashamed that he didn't want to include himself in the narration, so if you saw Sundown the fic before, it's. not canon anymore. Just a headsup!
Bastion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bastion’s realm was unsurprisingly a mechanical one. Evan’s transmitter hissed before Zip’s voice came through, a bit warped but still audible.

“I see him! Unfortunately, we’ve put quite a bit work into improving Bastion, so here’s his inventory—” Bastion roared and stomped on the ground, interrupting Zip by making the six scatter with bolts of lightning. “The legs!” Roland heard Evan yell before the latter ran off in the opposite direction. “Zip told us to go for the legs!”

Sure enough, a burst of light came from the left front leg, and Roland could see Bracken pulling out a gun while he ran in to pull a Flatliner on the weak spot. Then wind whipped at him- as he looked at the source of it, the core in Bastion’s chest was drawing in air and glowing red. Was that…

“Oi! Get out of there!” Bracken yelled behind him, and as he hurried back towards the exterior of the platform, a flurry of arrows, bullets and spells hurtled at the weak spot before a gush of fire burst out from the core onto the ground. Close call. Another slam of the metal claws, a blinding flash of lightning, and they found themselves split into two smaller groups by Bastion’s sheer size. Roland could see Tani and Bracken on one side- Bracken was tapping on her glove, then called into it while dodging. “Evan, can you hear me? Yes, I hacked into it. Make sure you don’t stand to its sides when its chest’s blue, the pipes emit steam!” There weren’t any glowing spots- must be on the other side. Tani imbued her arrows with lightning and fired them. With the metal armor Bastion had, guess gravity attacks had to do.

The Realmwrecker roared, and Tani pointed up. “What’s that?!” Small drones flew down from above Bastion, and Bracken was grimacing while yelling into the glove. “Drones! You’ve got to break them before they overwhelm you.” The other two got the message and got to work, and Bracken joined in on drone-bashing soon after. If he remembered correctly, when Realmwreckers summon things, then-

A drone broke into pieces, and from it, a beige Higgledie popped out. Another drone flew in, and with a beeping sound, a laser forced the three to drop and run, the blue beam exploding somewhere behind them. Purple lightning shot down, and Bracken snarled. “Argh- now I’ve had it!”

She squatted and summoned two… orbs from her arms band, setting it down on the floor. “The flip are you doing?” Tani yelled, jumping aside as another laser singed her cape- she fired an arrow to knock it off balance. “Activate code voila!” Bracken yelled. “Drone protocol alpha: attack mode!” The orbs grew wings, flew up- and started pelting Bastion’s drones with bullets. Tani’s eyes widened- Bastion’s chest grew blue. Toby let off a gravity orb that flattened one of the tower-like decorations on Bastion’s limbs. “I’ll get over to Evan and the others to give them a bit of backup, yeah?” With that, the engineer ran off. Tani grinned as a few more Higmakers gathered together. “Well, with these orbs helping us out-”

Roland grabbed Tani by the cape- sorry, Tani- and pulled her aside as the walking fortress turned, scalding steam puffing outwards to where they would be. Tani looked up. “You’re ba-” A weak spot appeared in the hind leg, and they turned to concentrate on hitting the realmwrecker where it hurt.

Except cannons suddenly bounced onto the ground around them. What- beige Higmakers landed on them as each one fired at the realmwrecker. Aha, Runcible’s signature attack, but multiplied.
Sparks began to fizzle around Bastion as he roared. A jolt went up Roland’s good arm as he tried stabbing the weak point. An electricity leakage—were the attacks registering? He stepped back and began charging an attack on his gun, but the weak point disappeared, so he let the bullet fly anyway. Another platoon of Bastion’s drones, yet another round of the purple bolts, another one of Toby’s attacks, another round of the Higmakers’ barrages—and suddenly Bastion reared up again. “It’s stunned!” Tani yelled, and they saw a larger glowing spot where Bastion’s core was. It was only natural that all six rushed it—and the weak spot broke with a ringing sound.

The realmwrecker roared, then collapsed. The six stepped back and formed a group again. “Is it…” Evan began, but the transmitter burst into sound—Zip yelled from it. “Not yet! It’s—”

Leander took out his staff and summoned a barrier as a gigantic bolt of lightning hit Bastion, sending more arcs hitting the magical shield and the metal constructs around them. The Hydropolitan hissed as the barrier faded. “You alright, Leander?” Evan asked, but another metallic roar in front of them revealed Bastion, surrounded by a field of electricity. Roland fired a Heavy Ammo at it, but it only disintegrated as it hit the field.

“Don’t get near it!” Zip yelled from the other side of the transmitter. “That’s his critical mode—you’ll get charred if you take even a step into that field!” “Then why the heck’d ye set that up, old man?!” Batu yelled, but Evan held up his hand. “I see a weak spot on his head! Can we do something about it, President Vector?!” “-yes, there’s enough energy to set up another light stairs but it’ll be less stable—can’t handle as much weight as before! And there’s the fie—” “Try it, President Vector—I’ll go! The electricity only covers Bastion, so—”

“Evan?!” Batu yelled, alarmed. “Don’t do it, kid! You heard the pres!” Evan turned around as Bastion roared again. “I know! But a leader must be willing to give his life to protect his people! That’s what Zip’s planning to do, and I understand now! And I won’t run away either!” A golden glow surrounded the young king as he faced the berserk realmwrecker. “Not again—not ever!”

“E- evan?” Lofty said, and he started to glow red. Leander pointed in front of the Kingmaker. “Look— the Kingsbond!” It was visible—growing stronger by the second. Lofty jumped. “Oh—Flippin’ ‘eck, mun-! I’m Buzzing!” He began to shine. “Here goes… nuthin’!” Blinding light then something flew up from where Lofty was—something enormous—a dragon. One that looked like the oriental dragons from Pexue, with a white head and a long, red body with spikes lining its back. “Lofty?” Evan gasped. “Lofty, that’s you, right?”

The dragon roared and dove, circling Bastion and restraining it. The mechanical beast roared, but the electric field fizzled to a stop. “It’s… restraining Bastion!” Zip reported from the transmitter. “Alright, I’m setting up pattern G! Go for it, kid!”

The stairs appeared, and the king began to run up them as they led further up into the air. Bastion roared, and purple lightning appeared on the glowing platforms—Evan dodged them and kept at it. Batu and Tani were cheering beside Roland—Bracken put on her goggles and looked, tapping on the glove. “Zip, how’s the reactor doing?” “Critical as usual, but I’m—” An explosion from the background. “I’m doing my best, Bracken! I can see through the camera—Evan’s almost there!”

The stairs flickered—Zip hissed audibly. “Come on, don’t fail me now!” Another boom, and Tani yelled. “Flip, no—”

The shining steps had disappeared, Evan suspended in the air. Bastion roared.

Evan.

He had to do something. He knew there was something he could try. Gravity, from the stories he’d
Roland raised his right hand, mind whirling as he remembered how he’d lifted papers off the table. This was far greater in distance and weight, but he had to do something. Think Windwhipper. He yelled.

“EVAN!” Because his role was- because heavens forbid if he ever let the young king get hurt when there was something he could do.

A tingling feeling went up his arm. He gritted his teeth. Evan hadn’t begun to fall- it had to work. He would see to it that it did.

His vision blurred. (A vague memory of the lecture notes: that overusing magic in a short period of time would exhaust the user.) Yellow- were the stairs- his heart was thundering too loudly- then he could feel himself buckling. Floating voices, then his vision came back into focus. The stairs of light were back. A sixth sensor sat on the ground next to him. He looked up, still feeling shaky. “Did it- is Evan-”

A metallic roar, then Bastion was bathed in blue light, Lofty untangling himself from the realmwrecker as the glow grew stronger. Batu nodded as Roland half-stumbled to his feet, patting the latter on his back. “It did. Welcome back, Roland.”

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They were back on the top of the tower. Evan blinked. “Where’s Lofty?” They looked around- the dragon was gone.

“Oh.” Bracken was looking down at the floor. “He’s here, guys.”

They gathered around the Kingmaker. (Did Lofty grow from the last time Roland saw him?) Leander hummed, stooping and observing. “It… seems like the Kingmaker has returned to his more… diminutive form.” Roland snorted. “Just say that he’s short.” A surprised gasp from his left, and Roland turned to see Evan, eyes wide open. Ah… yeah. He walked over and gave a gentle smile.

“Evan, I-” The young king already looked close to crying. Gah. Roland pulled Evan into a hug and exhaled. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt, Evan.” “I- Roland, you were-” Evan clung onto the older man, who after a moment, patted the young king’s head. “I’m…” He couldn’t find the words, still. “Sorry.”

A squeaking sound got their attention. Lofty had jumped onto his feet and was looking down at himself. “Eh?” The Kingmaker looked up at the six who returned intrigued stares. Then Lofty yelled at the sky.

“Youer kiddin’! And there I was just gettin’ used bein’ big and long and handsome again! Knickers-!”

Chapter End Notes

Dad mode activate!

Thank you for reading Chapter 62! Bastion’s fight was actually pretty fun to write with
my usual word limit! There's a lot of attacks to cover, unlike, ahem, Brineskimmer who's 80% swimming around and 10% shooting lasers.

I still feel that it's a bit clichey, but yes, this chapter is one of the reasons I set up the Heroic BSOD/Roland's absence from the narration in the first place. The other is that-well, we'll see. It's got something to with Roland being hit with his own angst train at full speed. Until this point, it's more akin to chipping away at his psyche, but now that 1. he's rebooted and 2. it's everything at once, things might be different. It's fun to see what happened in the 80k and 90k milestones, haha.

And hey, Roland got to return the hug that's way long overdue.
Zip joined them on the top of the tower soon enough and inspected Lofty, who glumly stared at the ground.

“My theory is that the Kingsbond between King Evan and… Lofty, was it?” With a nod from Evan, Zip continued. “The Kingsbond was strengthened, but by just enough- which let Lofty return to his original form for a short while.” Lofty jumped up to reply, “But! Buuut! If Evan gets more kingly and the bond gets stronger, I’ll be able to do it for longer, right? Maybe even forever in the end?” Before Zip could get a word in, the Kingmaker bounced to Evan. “Awrighto, Evan! You get kingin’ youer head off, you hear? It’s an order!” The young king’s mood had lightened up quite a bit, and he laughed. “Heheh, I will.”

“I still can’t believe you managed to take down Bastion… I can’t imagine what would happen if you didn’t.” Zip crossed his arms. “Well, nothing would’ve stopped the core from melting down, but… I can’t believe things turned out this way. Sorry. I built the reactor to try and help people, and instead, I endangered everyone instead…” The Executive Director sighed. “I’m no president. I don’t deserve to run this country…”

“You do, Zip!” A voice from somewhere, and with a look around the platform, Roland found a loudspeaker attached to the building where the elevator would be. “We’ve got your back, Zip!” Another Broadleafer said. More and more supportive voices joined in, eventually forming a chant. “Vector! Vector! Vector!” The Executive Director stepped back, awe in his expression. Bracken smiled and shrugged. “Don’t deserve to run this country? I think your people have something to say about that.”

A smile had found its way into Zip’s expression, and he raised his hands to his mouth to shout. “Thank you- all of you!” The cheers continued until the many Broadleafers got each other to calm down. Evan stepped forward. “President Vector- I came here originally to ask you something. You see… I’m trying to bring peace to our world: real, lasting peace. But I will need your help to do it. Can I count on your support?” The Broadleaf President nodded. “I’m sure we can come to some kind of arrangement- we’d need a preferential trade agreement, of course… Do you guys have an official technology partner?” Evan frowned. “Uh-

“I doubt so.” Roland spoke up. “While Goldpaw and Hydropolis are quite advanced in other aspects, but Evermore doesn’t have the same kind of support in technology.” “Great!” Zip clapped his hands. “Then we’ll sign this treaty right away. I heard the scroll can float?”

Lofty sputtered. “Yoy, mun, that the only thing our Declaration’s known for?” “It’s all over Leafbook, of course I’d know. Well, King Evan?” Evan was grinning. “Yes, let’s.”

With a sigh, the Kingmaker clapped his hands, and the scroll floated up between them. (“That’s so cool!” Zip said.) “Let our nations be joined for the sake of the world.” Evan stepped forward, raising the twig. “Let the banners of war ne’er again be unfurled.” Zip continued, holding up his smartstick. A press of the smartstick’s button, and the two items of importance struck. “United we stand, as one single land!”

The green sigil on the background of the treaty floated outward: next to Longfang’s spot, a stamp in the likeness of Bastion appeared, then the sigil was absorbed into the paper.
“There.” Zip pressed the button on the smartstick, and it retracted like an umbrella. “We’ll get back down to town- I’ve got at least a few questions to ask.”

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“So you’re saying this Naverre’s looking to bring back the Horned One, and you’re looking to stop him?”

Evan nodded at Zip and answered, “Yes- that’s why we’re seeking the support of the other nations. If we can join forces, we may stand a chance.” “Hm.” Zip scratched at his forehead. “And with us having hopped on board, Ding Dong Dell’s the last big player left… That’ll be difficult.” Evan frowned, but his eyes were gleaming with determination. Zip smiled. “And I see you’re not going to back down that easily. Don’t worry, we’re right behind you. As President of Broadleaf, you have my word.” The President turned to Bracken, who was standing next to him. “You going with our new friends, Bracken?” “Yes, Mr. President- just as you ordered.”

A united expression of surprise from the Evermore crew. “But- but is that alright?” Evan asked. “Bracken’s really important to Broadleaf, isn’t she?” “Sure, and she’ll be really important to Evermore, too. I can hardly send any second-rate engineer to help our new partners now, can I?” Bracken grinned and walked forward, cracking her knuckles. “You heard the man! I’ll be on hand for all your mechanical and technological needs from now on! From hairclips to airships, I’m your gal!”

“So much for second-rate.” Roland raised his hand. “We don’t have any… workshops yet.” “Oh, that’s easy.” Bracken grinned. “I’ll just go build one.” He blinked. “Huh?” “Well, we could go to Evermore right now, if everyone’s alright with it- I’m sure there’s a spot where I can work on.”

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And so Bracken did, picking a spot near the river to set up the steam boilers she had brought along in her arms and working from afternoon till night. The drones that she had were activated and stacked bricks and piles of wood on each other with clamps and levers. The Evermore citizens clamoured outside the plot of land and watched. Evan had opted to try dealing with the monthly papers, assigning Roland to oversee the building of the workshop. With Batu and Tani checking in with the army and Leander having gone off… somewhere, he’d decided to just sit there while Bracken tinkered away.

“So Broadleaf technology really hasn’t spread all that far, huh…” Bracken muttered as she pumped a bit of steam out of the boiler. Roland watched, sitting as Pyrite breathed a tiny bit of fire into the brass machine, letting it light up the half-built room. “Well, once we’ve got more resources brought over from Broadleaf, we’ll start getting things done with this facility. Electricity, repairs- we could even get a few of them security bots in!”

Something itched at Roland’s mind. “What kind of technology would be viable here in the short term?” “Hm.” Bracken turned a bolt on the boiler. “We could start small- crystal batteries could shake things up a little.” She looked up. "Night lighting would do wonders for defense, don’t you think?"

His stomach did a flip- and he knew why. “I think so, yes.” His legs wanted him to move somewhere else. He got up. “Well, uh, I’ll go patrol the areas around here, Bracken. You’ve already got quite an audience.” “Sure!”

Roland found himself walking back to the castle, leaning on the wall just outside the main entrance to pinch his eyebrows and breathe in. Crickets chirruped from a distance. What was he even
thinking?

Slowly, the static cleared, and he turned around, ready to head back to the mostly-built workshop. But something in the main hall caught his eye.

Leander was hiding behind one of the pillars, aiming a magic bolt at… Roland's eyes followed the direction and saw a strange purple thing near the ceiling. (The decorations from before had been removed.) Could the Hydropolitan be scared of… bugs? Leander fired off the spell and hurried to catch it as the thing fell down. Could the Hydropolitan be a bug collector? Roland watched as Leander looked at what he caught, grimaced, and returned further into the castle, not noticing the darker-clad Chief Consul just outside.

What was going on?

He remembered that he still needed to get back to the workshop, and hurried as his head was filled with even more questions than before.

Chapter End Notes

And with technology in Evermore, i think we know what's going to happen, haha.

Thank you for reading Chapter 63! We won't get into Ding Dong Dell's arc quite yet because there's still a bit of a thing to sort out, but yeah, Leander's starting to investigate things.
It was late night, and Roland was unable to sleep.

By nearly midnight, Bracken had finished building the workshop and with some insisting, sent the Chief Consul away. The others must’ve went to sleep as well- the fight with Bastion was exhausting, and they needed the rest.

But there were too many questions- there was this unimaginable urge to get up and start pacing. Agitation. So he sat up on his bed, kneading his forehead.

Firstly, there was Leander, from earlier, who shot down something from the ceiling. Now that he thought of it, it seemed familiar- a purple object, with an eye on its head… The Eye from Hydropolis, but smaller. He stood up and checked his room. There didn’t seem to be anything similar. Good. But what were the miniature Eyes doing in Evermore? Surveillance? But then, why would Leander- he made a mental note to ask the Hydropolitan later on.

Then there was the fact that he hadn’t been able to apologise to everyone for, well, everything. From the tumble, to the secret-keeping, to the- well, it was embarrassing to even think about, half a day later. He didn’t know how to go about it, when to go about it.

And then… the crystal battery. It was such a far-fetched idea. But the two pieces of technology looked similar. There was no way it would work. But he wanted to-

He closed his eyes and sighed. Now that he was aware, painfully aware, he knew if he kept at it, he would be heading into a- another frenzy.

He didn’t want anyone to worry again. Never again.

But first, the urge to walk. He put on his shoes and headed out of his room, letting his legs guide him.

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He found himself at the Spellworks before long. A dim light from within- Hau Ling and Li Li had a habit of staying up, the former taking the opportunity to consult the stars and the latter working on new spells and charms. Maybe...

He hesitated, then knocked and went in. The two Ministers of Magic looked up, a single candle providing light on the table between them. “Good evening, Chief Consul.” Hau Ling said. “What are you doing, being up this late?” “Uh… I couldn’t sleep.” Roland felt nervous. Come on, it was worth a shot. “Is it possible… that I ask for a fortune reading?” Hau Ling tilted her head. “This is a first for you.” “Well, yeah.” At this point, he was desperate for pointers. “Is there anything I need to do?”

Hau Ling was about to speak, but Li Li raised her hand. “Wait, Hau Ling. I’m already getting something.” The older sorceress’ eyes widened. “The stage is yours.” “Okay.” Li Li turned to Roland, the air of authority intensifying. “You are in turmoil.” He chuckled awkwardly. “I wouldn’t be if I-” “You have lost your way.” Well, hell. Li Li stared straight at him- through him?- as she continued. “By bridging the gap, you will find your way out of the darkness. But first, you must find strength.” “From where?” Roland asked.
“From your family.” Li Li inhaled. “Hm- that was it.” Hau Ling was looking at her, frowning, but nodded. “I apologise if it was vague, Chief Consul, but fortune tellings have always been like that.” “Ah…” Roland knew what to do. “I think I understand. Thank you.”

He left the facility. Family… huh.

He tapped on his arms band, and caught the object as the light faded. He looked at his phone- the screen completely dark, the battery depleted.

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Bracken was still in her workshop, doing some more adjustments on the boiler when Roland knocked on the door and stepped in. A set of lamps lit the interior.

“Uh, Bracken- there’s something I was thinking if…” Roland frowned and simply showed Bracken the phone. Bracken raised her eyebrows. “I don’t think I’ve seen this before in Broadleaf…” She stood up. “What’s this?” “It’s… ah, a family heirloom.” More or less. “It works like a miniature Leafbook, but it’s run out of battery, I was thinking…” “If the crystal battery would work for it, you mean?” Bracken stretched. “I thought I saw you look hopeful when I mentioned that. Can I take a look at it?” He gave the phone to Bracken. “We have something like a charging port at the base…” “I see it.”

The engineer put on her goggles and grabbed a paper, sketching the dimensions of the charge port on the table next to the boiler while Roland watched. Then she took out chisels and a piece of crystal. “You’re right, the framework does resemble Leafbooks. I’ll see if I can fit a chip of it into the port.” Roland felt a twinge of apprehensiveness. “Be careful with the screen- it’s pretty fragile.” “Sure. Don’t worry about the crystal, by the way- the newest versions adjust themselves to the machinery.”

As Bracken took a carving knife and screw and started tinkering away, Roland found his stomach twisting itself into knots. What if the battery worked? It would make things easier, but… he wasn’t sure if he was ready.

He both hoped and dreaded that the phone would turn on.

“Aha.” Bracken blew a bit of dust off the chip of crystal and pushed her goggles back on top on her head. “I think this should be ju-st right.” Roland responded by smiling in encouragement. She slotted it into the charging port. “The on-off button is at the side. It’s the short one.” He said, and Bracken pressed the button. “You have to hold it.” She did.

The logo blinked on the phone screen, then a few seconds later, the phone clicked to life, displaying a young boy with black hair on the screen. (Battery: Charging 1%). His eyes were drawn to it. Everything seemed to freeze for a moment.

"When everything’s over, I’ll come and stay with you until you recover.” “Promise?” “Promise.” His heart clenched. He inhaled- then frowned as it didn’t let up. The table blurred in front of him.

It wasn’t an emotional response.

He held onto the side of the table for support and closed his eyes from the vertigo. “Hey, uh… you alright?” Bracken noticed. “Y-” He didn’t want anyone to worry, dammit. “Yeah. Happens. Gimme a moment.” It’d happened thrice by now. After Longfang, after Brineskimmer- wait. Was it correlation or causation? A part of his mind asked, alarmed.

The dizziness passed after a minute or so. He sighed(in relief) and straightened up. “Sorry about
that. I’ll go get some rest—wanting to fix my phone was keeping me up.” He took the phone. “But thanks for helping me out. Don’t stay up too late, Bracken.” The engineer was frowning, but nodded. “I see… well, count on me to do exactly that.” “Heh.”

Of course, he wouldn’t be able to sleep, Roland thought as he headed back into the castle. But tomorrow… tomorrow, he would tell them. To bridge the gap and apologise. Whatever it takes.

Chapter End Notes

The phone that hasn't been seen from what? chapter 11? comes back with a vengeance.

Thank you for reading Chapter 64! Roland's finally getting it. I admit it does feel strange to see Roland literally bounce from doing nothing to being almost impulsive, but I hope what he's doing makes sense, haha. Anyway 0: We're almost there my peeps

Roland probably is such a weird person to Bracken. Being a ghost, then doing dad, then asking her to fix some kind of technology she's never seen before in the same day pfft

Also: thank you for 80 kudos!
Roland waited until the morning reports were over before he brought it up.

‘Uh… There’s something I’d like to-’ A deep breath. His stomach was not helping in the slightest. “-tell you.”

“About what?” Batu asked. “It’s… personal.” There was no going back now. Leander looked up-at the ceiling, where somehow, another tiny Eye had took its place. “Then I suppose it would be best if we take it to somewhere more private. Your room, I suggest?” “Y- yes. That would be good.”

“Ah… If that’s the case,” Bracken piped up, “I’ll go check up on my workshop.” Evan blinked, but nodded. “Sure.”

The pink-haired engineer headed out of the castle, and Roland turned. No backing out of it now. “Well, let’s go.”

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They stood in a small circle in the center of the room- the screen of the phone was small, so Roland requested it. Batu scratched his head. “So what’d ye want to talk about?” Roland brought his phone out of his arms band. Seeing his son on the lockscreen still sent a stabbing pain through him no matter how many times he saw it. “Everything.”

He’d recited it so many times through the night. He tapped on the photos app and looked. There it was. He tapped again. Him as a sixty-year-old, hair greying and in the suit he’d wore when he arrived in this world appeared on the screen. (Oscar took it for him.) “I believe you know I’m from a world different from yours?” The other four nodded. Batu had an expression of realisation.

Roland sighed. One, two, three. He raised his phone for the others to see. “This is me- what I should’ve looked like. I am a sixty-year old president from another world.”

There was less reaction from the four than he’d expected. “In my world, there was also a peace treaty, set down by my predecessor, but when I became president, something went wrong. I was too late to act. The nations turned on each other, and I was to take blame and step down.”

He remembered. The meetings, the conferences, the emails and the mess- “But resigning only made the relations between nations worse- and when I tried to get the leaders together, my nation was attacked by a weapon. A nuke, that worked similarly to Zip’s reactor: when it blew up, it would take the entire nation and everyone with it. I… was there to see it.” Leander’s eyes widened. Roland lowered the phone as he continued, “And then I found myself as a twenty-year-old in Evan’s room. I still don’t know why it happened.”

The next topic he had to cover was what was happening to his arm. He desummoned the phone. “The… corruption started after Evan and I ran out of the Ding Dong Dell. At first, I didn’t think much of it- there was no magic in my world, so I thought it was just some kind of scar. But after we fought Longfang, it spread, and it did again after Brineskimmer.” And now… Roland took off his coat, left it on the floor, and rolled up the sleeve of his turtleneck. The corruption had nearly reached his shoulder. “And after fighting Bastion, it’s spread up to here. Leander’s confirmed that it has something to do with the Horned One.” After reciting it so many times, he… still was in disbelief.
He yanked the sleeve down. “If it overwhelms me… well, I’ll just disappear. I suppose Lofty’s told you about it.” That was the end of the script. Steady- Keep it like a conference. He was used to them. “Any questions?”

“If ye’re the old man, who’s the kid?” Batu asked. “The one that showed up when ye turned on the thing.” No turning back now. “That was… my son.” He turned on the phone again, looking at the young boy. His son. Oscar. “Oscar. My wife’s name was Lissa. They… couldn’t have survived the attack.” He lowered the phone- the ground was easier to look at. “It was my fault. I was too late to act.”

“Gosh… I’m so sorry,” Someone- Evan?- muttered. Evan. Roland felt a pang of guilt. He wanted to explain. “I… When I came to this world and met Evan, I thought by helping him, I could redeem myself. It was a selfish thought, I know, but I… there was nothing else I could think of doing. But as time went by, I started to doubt whether it was enough. If it was ever enough for redemption.” The words became to tumble over each other. “And I started to enjoy being here: I enjoyed working in Evermore. I should’ve been- I should be mourning for my family, my nation, but I…” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I was happy being when I shouldn’t.”

A sense of wetness. “And then one day, I learnt that I would die. And then one day I learnt that I wouldn’t. That instead, I would be separated from everyone forever until I forgot even who I was. I don’t know how to stop it, I don’t know when it will happen, but it will.” Why did his eyes feel like they were on fire? “I- maybe if I… I don’t know if there’s anything after death. Maybe I- I thought maybe I can meet my family again if there is?” The thought horrified him. A taste of bile. Aching, trembling jaws. “-but I can’t. That’d be- I don’t want to. I have to be here, I want to be here,” In the darkness, he could feel the world swirling around him. “if that means any moment I’ll be taken away from everything and everyone I love-”

And then he was aware.

He opened his eyes, meeting the solemn stares of the others. Then… If this was… His arms slackened as it dawned on him. A clatter on the floor. If this was what he really felt- if it came out of his mouth so easily, then…

They had stepped closer- he was encircled. “I don’t want to say goodbye yet. And instead of cherishing every moment, I wasted time.” He stared at the floor. It blurred, cleared, and blurred again. Someone make the pain stop. “I was-” Someone make him stop. “-I…”

Words failed him. In the end, everything still happened, and here he was, letting everything happen as he did. As he always did, until everything was too late and doing anything made it worse. Hurt even more people. He tried a bitter smile that almost immediately shook and faltered, closing his eyes in defeat.

“I’m sorry. I’m a coward. That’s all.”

He felt something pressing on his head- ruffling his hair, then he was pulled into a hug. Then murmurs around him, hands on shoulders, around arms. The last threads of defence unraveled.

He sobbed, repeating long overdue apologies at no one and everyone in particular until his voice grew hoarse and there were no more tears that could be shed.

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“We’ll mark ye as sick today. Take a nap, ye hear?”
Everything looked awfully blurry when Roland tried to look up from his bed. “…sorry. I probably look like a mess.” “Ye’ve always been a mess, it just took a while for ye to let yerself look like it.” He couldn’t help but chuckle weakly at that.

“We will get back to our duties…” He heard Leander say, but he was already sinking.

Perhaps... a nap was a good idea.

Chapter End Notes

Wow I can finally add the hurt/comfort tag after 65 goddamn chapters now amirite

Thank you for reading Chapter 65! This Roland's been choosing to stay in Evermore consciously all along and, well. At first it was out of obligation and a want of redemption, then it became something like ‘ah well, I'm just waiting anyway’. And then he realises that no, he doesn't want to die, and after that there's the whole 'you can't die' thing which turns the choice into well, one family or the other. He's got a tough life.

Of course, this won't be the end of this little arc. You can probably guess what I'm going to pull already.
Dreams weren’t as forgiving.

He was home, back in his older self and suit. A silent, blood-red line of skyscrapers. Like fire in the sky. A familiar voice from behind, calling his name.

“Daddy?”

He turned around, and there was his son, standing, clad in simple pajamas. Roland half-ran forward to hold Oscar by his shoulders.

“Oscar? You’re okay…” He murmured, pulling his dear son into a hug. “Daddy, I was so scared!” His son cried into his suit, arms clinging to it. He reached his hand to stroke Oscar’s hair. “You’re safe now. I’ll protect you.”

“Will you really?”

Roland felt the hands on his jacket loosen. His son had gone limp. That’s right… his family was dead. Died in the nuke. It was his fault. “I’m sorry.” Roland said, holding his son by his shoulders to look. It was his fault. Oscar’s face was burnt, eyes nothing but pooling, dripping holes of ash.

It smelled like burning flesh and oil. Oil oozed down Oscar’s face. “It’s a little too late for that…” The young boy whispered and crumbled into dust. Wind blew him away, and Roland reached out, crying out. “No, don’t go away- please - Oscar, I can still-”

He woke, gasping. A look around the room reminded him that he was in Evermore. In his room. His eyes still felt puffy, but it seemed to be afternoon.

“Roland?” He looked along the length of the bed, and found Evan sitting at the edge of it. He blinked, then rubbed his eyes. “D- Didn’t you go back to work?” Roland asked, and the young king raised his hand to point to the desk on the other side of the room, where papers were stacked. “Well… yes and no. I heard it wouldn’t be good to forcefully wake someone from a nightmare…”

So he noticed. Roland blinked his eyes again- it was better than before, but there was still some blurriness. “Can I… sit up?” “Mm-hm.” He shifted so he was sitting on the bed next to Evan, and they stayed that way for a while. Then Evan coughed. “What did you dream about?”

He didn’t want anyone to worry anymore, and he’d best start here. “I… was back in my world. It was ruined, and then…” It still hurt. “I saw Oscar. I tried to comfort him, but he… fell to ashes in my hands. Then I woke up.” There was a question- a worry that he wanted to confirm. “Evan, do you feel that I was using you as- as a replacement? Now that you know I had a son…”

Evan raised his fist to his chin at that, thinking. “I can understand if you’re upset about it.” Roland hastily added. “I’m sorry if- to be honest, I’m-” “Can you tell me about Oscar?” Evan asked suddenly.

He didn’t expect it, but he could. “Oscar’s… a few years older than you are. He was born with the same heart defect I had, but we could find the best doctors there were to help fix it. I taught him everything I could- even that bit about standing up to bullies.” He remembered that Oscar sputtered
when he mentioned it and smiled. “Being the President’s son… was taxing for him, but he’s strong. He did his best.”

The warm feeling slipped away from his grasp. “A few weeks before I, well, stepped down from president, Oscar fell sick. A seasonal epidemic.” Influenza. “It spread to his lungs, and—” Was there a word for hospital here? “It got critical, but eventually the doctors got it under control.” When everything’s over, I’ll come and stay with you until you recover. Roland sighed quietly. “I promised him that I would be with him until he was well again, but…” He never got that chance. “You know what happened.”

Gah, he was making the room glum again. “Sorry, Evan. I admit, there definitely were times when I’d see you as… well, my son.” He tried to smile and joke. “Don’t tell anyone.” The room was quiet for a moment, then Evan spoke up. “In that case, I’d like you to keep a secret for me in return.”

Roland nodded, and the young king smiled. “Sometimes I think that you… remind me of my father. So I admit I think of you as my father as well.” Oh. Oh, uh- “I’m honored.”

Roland watched as Evan took his hands in his and continued. “You were there when I felt too weak to go on, so… if there’s a time when you’re, well… you’re hurting, I’m fine with being called Oscar.” The young king grinned. “Don’t tell anyone.” He was… warm. “I…” Maybe saying that he would do the same wasn’t the best way to do it. Roland felt the corners of his mouth curl up. “I promise, Evan.” It didn’t need to be said.

They continued sitting like that for a while, then Tani knocked on the door, saying there was something Gao Jia wanted to discuss about new battle tactics (“But if you want to, I’ll tell him to postpone it.”), and after insisting that he’d be fine and national defenses were important, Evan slowly trotted out of his room. Roland smiled until the door closed, then buried his face in his hands.

If only… if only he’d realized sooner.

---

That night, he dreamt of a completely trashed office, books and papers scattered on the floor. Doloran sat on his chair, quietly looking as Roland blinked. Somehow, the cup of tea he had offered months ago still sat on the table, untouched and puffing steam.

“What happened here?” He managed. “You don’t remember?” Doloran asked, and Roland shook his head. “For the last few times you were here, you were throwing things around in a rage.”

He didn’t remember any of it… wait. “Do you remember hitting me across the face with your shackles and kicking me out of the dream, Doloran? After I fought Longfang?” “No. I did? Oh makers above, I’m sorry.” Roland kept in a laugh. “Guess we’re even.”

He settled. “Anyway… I think I know now.” Doloran watched him as he continued, “What I have to do- what I want to do. I want to make the most of what time I have left.” Still for redemption, still for Evan- but… for his own sake as well. So he wouldn’t have any more regrets. “So… thanks.” He surveyed the office again. “I’ll go tidy this up.” The bookshelves were a start- the books were scattered in a pile at the base of it. He passed by Doloran, then stooped, starting to sort the books into stacks.

“I envy you.”

Roland turned. Doloran stood up, facing the other. If the masked man said anything, he didn’t show it. “Did you…” “Let me help.”
The cloth around Doloran’s shoulders seemed to shift—then the books and papers floated and arranged themselves on the bookshelves. Behind Doloran, even the toppled items stood again. In no time at all, the office was as tidy as Roland had remembered.

“Doloran, you—” “This is a dream.” Doloran simply said. “Things can be manipulated.” Roland frowned, then, “Doesn’t that mean you can just drink that tea by suspending the cup?” A pause. The dream was fading away, but Roland could remember the other’s voice, and a faint smile.

“Maybe. But this is a dream. And… I started thinking… I’d rather want to hold it with my own two hands.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 66! Honestly the fact that I’m less confident with... softer content than angst gets me, lol

Either way, the act 7 fun's going to start next chapter, so sit tight! I'll try my best with it, haha.
Roland ended up taking two more days off- the first by being politely reminded that while yes, he could excuse it as an allergy, he still looked terrible, and by realizing that he couldn’t concentrate well on paperwork; the second by remembering he could teleport out of Evermore and ending up taking the chance to do some talent-searching after leaving behind a note on what he was up to.

He found out there was an agency set up to facilitate exactly that, by completing requests- fetch quests, or sometimes monster slaying- to receive recommendations. (‘We would’ve had our base in Ding Dong Dell if not for that travel ban!’” The bearded man had said.) And so he did exactly that, eventually sending off an high-ranked Hydropolitan spearwoman and her troop, a teacher from Goldpaw who revealed herself to have taught Evan when he was younger and a few engineers to Evermore.

In any case, it was a much-needed, much-welcomed mental breather.

When he returned at late afternoon, he was notified that Evan and the others had headed to Leucippes to carry out a mock battle with Hydropolis’ troops, thanks to a letter of challenge the Hydropolitan troop leader had brought with her. It was the perfect chance for him to stealthily drop off the… souvenirs he had gathered. (A bandana, a plush, a puzzle book, a book on sewing, and a recipe book on how to make Broadleaf food- fast. He tried.) Once he had done so and double-checked that everything was running smoothly, he took a walk.

With a bit of help from Toby, he was able to be certain that there weren’t any of the mini-Eyes in the suites that he went into- at least, not visibly. (He couldn’t risk being seen checking if there were.) That explained what Leander did before. But he could see them scattered along the corridors in the castle, leading even into the more obscure storage rooms. It was sufficient- worryingly sufficient evidence.

He returned to the throne room. He needed more information, and he trusted that he would get it. He just needed to wait.

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It was late night when he heard a knock at the door of his room. “Come in.” He called.

Leander, in a simple shirt and trousers, opened the door- a relief, it would still catch Roland off guard for someone else to see him ungloved. The Junior Consul raised the puzzle book, stepped further into the room and closed the door behind him. “I received your message. How’s your arm, Roland?” “Fine.” Roland snapped his fingers in demonstration- the book on the desk he sat at levitated upwards. “If anything, I seem to have gotten better-” “Better is an understatement.”

He turned around on his chair to see Leander floating a few inches above ground, as with some other objects. What the- “Going beyond your limits allowed you more access to your potential.” Leander commented, landing with dignified grace as the gravity returned. Roland chuckled. “Or, you know, losing more of my body to the Horned One did it.” Time to get serious. “Anyway, this isn’t what I want to talk about.” Roland stood up. “I’m aware that there’s been mini-Eyes being placed in Evermore’s castle. There aren’t any in our personal rooms. Do you know anything about them?”
Leander nodded. “I have been meaning to talk to you about it. Yes.”

The Junior Consul walked over to the desk and placed a shrivelled, purple object on it- a mini-eye, or what was left of it. “As you said, they indeed function similarly to the Eye. I’d thought that the… technology of creating Eyes were unique to Hydropolis, but it seems not to be the case anymore.” He pushed up his glasses. “While I have investigated that they are currently only present in the castle, the number has increased after our return from Broadleaf. So there is only one possible culprit: Ding Dong Dell.”

“Guess they finally decided to start doing something about Evermore.” If originally, Hydropolis was the only nation that knew how to produce Eyes, then… “Naverre’s probably the one to teach Mausinger to make these mini-eyes. Can they see through walls like the Hydropolitan one can?”

“No- the scrying magics were only able to do so with the magnification the Eye provides. The size of these mean that their magic, and therefore, surveillance is limited.” A relief. “Good to know.”

“Our most pressing question is what to do about the ones that are currently in use.” Leander said. “You tried to take one down, but it was replaced.” Roland noticed the surprise in the other’s expression. “Lucky encounter- but that means there’s a spy amongst us.” “I could cast a spell to disrupt the surveillance, the risk being that it would alert said spy.” “And attempts to capture would simply mean the spy would be replaced…”

They stood for a while, thinking. There was a nudge of an idea in Roland’s mind, but it was too fresh- too outrageous- to be suggested yet. “I say we do nothing and observe for now. We know Ding Dong Dell’s doing it.” He raised his hand to his chin. “We’ll be working to get Ding Dong Dell in our treaty soon, and now they’re kind enough to throw us a line…” He blinked. “But we still need to be certain who the spy is. You said Hydropolis knows how to make Eyes- I’m guessing that means you, as Archon, know about it?” “I believe I know what you’re getting at.” The Junior Consul took the mini-eye and stored it. “I’ll create some of my own.”

Well, that was that. Roland nodded and concluded, “I guess that’s all that’s available to us for now. You should get some rest.” Still, it thrilled Roland to think- to be able to plan. “I’ll try my best to help.”

As always, Leander’s expression was hard to read, but he nodded as he turned around. “Good night, Roland.” The door clicked shut again. Roland pulled the string holding his ponytail off. A nagging sense of not being able to do enough- there wasn’t enough to go by yet, he reminded himself. These weren’t times to be impulsive, as much as he wanted to be immediately rid of his former habits.

For once, he would try to get some sleep. He couldn’t afford to lose his grip anymore, and he needed the energy to think tomorrow. Roland turned off the lamp.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 67! This is mostly setting down things for later, but, well, I hope you can guess how I’m going to do Act 7, haha.

There’ll be plenty of interaction between our two Consuls and I’m looking forward to posting them, although at this moment I’m proof-reading something like 4-5 chapters together and honestly it’s a bit hard to handle. But with end-game around the corner(and something like a month or so left for summer break) I can do this!!
“Now that we’ve got Ding Dong Dell left on our list, how’re we goin’ to get there?” Batu asked during the morning meeting the next day. “Ye and I all know they ain’t goin’ to make peace any time soon.” “About that, I had Chingis and his pals go survey the place on the birdmobiles while we were gone doing mock battles, but the whole area’s crawling with soldiers and mages.” Tani reported. “One of them planes nearly got torched. So it’s impossible for us to sneak in and start yelling about world peace.”

“We could use the Kingsway…” Evan muttered, and Leander caught on. “Kingsway?” “It’s a path only accessible to the royal rulers of… ah.” The young king smacked his forehead. “We’re missing the key to open it. The Mark of Kings. I remember Nelly and I hid it... hm.” What if the mini-Eyes had audio reception? Roland decided to cut in. “And that’s because I popped into your room from thin air and got you to follow me. My bad.”

“Do you think Mausinger knows about it?” Tani asked. “He knows that there’s a Mark.” Evan said. “It was passed down to me when my father died… it’s a heirloom and an item showing the right to rule, you see. But the layout of the castle is a secret kept within the royal family. Not even a chancellor like Mausinger would know where the secret rooms are-”

“It would be helpful if we had the mark,” Leander interrupted, confirming Roland’s worry, “but we’d have to get into Ding Dong Dell to assist us in getting into Ding Dong Dell. The former is a feat on its own, unfortunately.” “You’re right…” Evan muttered. To get into… Roland felt the cogs in his mind start turning. If the spy was watching through the mini-Eyes, then they would be aware of what the people of Evermore were up to. Then…

With his brief absence and then sneaking into everyone’s rooms, he’d be looking pretty suspicious already, wouldn’t he?

Hm. “Well, uh…” Bracken was saying. “In that case, I’ve got some good news for you all. The workshop is fully up and running, so in case we get forced into fighting our way through hordes of soldiers and all that, I’ll be able to whip something up in a jiffy to keep the casualties to a minimum.” Evan nodded. “Thank you, Bracken.” “It’s what the Minister of Ingenuity does- be resourceful, right?” The young king nodded. “I’m sure we’ll find a way in. Well… I guess we can end the meeting here.”

As the ministers dispersed, Roland tapped Leander on his shoulder. “Would you do the favor of helping me catch up with recent events?” He framed his words, and the Consuls headed off to the library.

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Once Leander made sure there weren’t any mini-Eyes in the vicinity, the two sat down at the table. Roland tapped on the wooden surface as he asked quietly, “Since Hydropolis has a castle, I’d like to ask: where would secret rooms be, usually?”

Leander frowned at the sudden question. “They tend to be situated near the personal chambers. I had one connected to my room there, for example.” A pause. “You…” Roland nodded. “I have an idea to draw the spy’s attention- feed the spy, basically, and let them take me to Ding Dong Dell.
I’ve been there once- I should know how to get out of it.”

He immediately recognised the main difficulty of said plan, but he went on. “For someone as high-ranked as I currently am, if I let myself show as… disloyal, Ding Dong Dell would surely catch on. I can negotiate for a similarly high-up position, then work from there.” A pause. “Of course, that means I have to show it.” Damn, he sure was going against his word about not worrying the others quickly.

“Our main issue is the details on the getaway.” Roland took out a notebook from his arms band and flipped it open, starting to mark down the route taken back when the coup happened. “There were sewers that led to outside of the castle, but with Mausinger, he’d know to close it off because last time. Hm.” He noted that Leander was frowning, and once he paused, the Junior Consul pushed up his glasses. “Why expose yourself as a target? You’ve only just repaired relations with your companions. You, yourself, had just begun to recover. A wrong step, and things might become worse. Are you equipped to face that risk?”

Roland was well aware of that, but he tried his best to answer. “Batu’s right; there’s no way Mausinger’s going to let us waltz in singing peace hymns. But Evan aims to bring world peace, and starting a war between Evermore and Ding Dong Dell won’t achieve it. So sneaking in to get the Mark is our best shot- and I’m the only one among us whose past, well, is known by exactly four people. To Mausinger and the people I need to fool, I’m just some nobody who happened to be at the right spot at the right time to escape from the coup with Evan, and got the job of Chief Consul because of it. So it has to be me.” Leander didn’t respond, so Roland cleared his throat. “If it helps, I’m willing to risk it.”

The library was silent, and Roland tried to quell the flitting feeling in his chest.

“I doubt Mausinger would expect you to escape through the sewers in another form.” Leander suddenly said. “Like a frog, for example.” Roland blinked. “Frog?” “The result of an... experiment in Hydropolis- it would turn you into one for a period of time. I should be able to remember the instructions.” Roland squinted. “Why was the first thought you had about turning into a frog?” “It was... memorable.” The Junior Consul pushed up his glasses. “And it will be effective. We came to an agreement to never bring up the incident again, so I doubt Naverre would’ve known and warned Mausinger about it.” “...fair enough.”

The conversation soon became a brainstorm session that continued for nearly an hour- after confirming their modus operandi, Roland would throw out possible situations and Leander would list solutions he could think of. (“If they found out I’m faking treason, I might have to fake my own death as well.” “I think we can find help about that. Bullets, I assume?” “Uh, yes.”) As the ideas dwindled, the two Consuls checked the final draft of items that they were to prepare.

“I’ll work to obtain these within today- most of these can be constructed in the Hubbly-Bubbly. I’ve been assigned to it, so it will not raise suspicions, thankfully. Of course, we can only know the effectiveness after I’ve returned, so I’d like you to do a bit of mental preparation.” Leander pushed up his glasses, stood up and sighed. “I can’t fathom that I’m helping you with such a dangerous, implausible plan.” Roland couldn’t help but smirk in response. “Heh. Welcome aboard, I’ll try not to die.” “I’m helping you to not do that.” Roland smiled at that. “I know. Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes
Roland and Leander: Evan no don't talk about that

Thank you for reading Chapter 68! With what happened with the previous chapters, I'm going to shake things up a little bit too, so I hope it'll be a fun read for you all! (Although if there's any logical errors hmu because I'm still juggling 5 chapters together here lol)
Effect

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Gah-” “It’s me. Shush.”

Roland didn’t expect Leander to teleport into his room- he had been sketching a layout of Ding Dong Dell’s castle from the tidbits that he remembered later that night- but he settled down quickly. The Junior Consul went to the windows of the room and tapped his wand on it. The pane of glass turned black. “We are lucky that our rooms are adjacent. I would not want to risk appearing in the others’ rooms in a sudden.”

The bespectacled man(again in simple shirt and trousers) walked to the table and started putting down various items- a few pink-tipped bullets, a… doll of Lofty? And then a blue oval object, a pair of white-framed glasses, and a candy with a image of a frog printed on the wrapper. “Once we’ve tested these out, I’ll provide you with another set, along with a few spares. There's also another gadget that I haven't finished yet, which I'll bring as soon as it is available.”

Leander picked up the blue oval and handed it to Roland along with the glasses. “When you throw this, the shell will come apart and release light. Put on the glasses before you do, though- the light is strong enough to blind you for a while without them.”

Roland adjusted the glasses on his nose and threw the magical flash grenade up. A crack, and he could see- well, blinding light that faded after a moment. He took the glasses off- the lens were tinted black. The same had happened to Leander’s glasses, and the Junior Consul nodded as it returned to normal. “We throw it upwards in case Higgledies are born from the contained light. I hope you keep that in mind- angry Higgledies are something you’d want to avoid.” “Gotcha.”

Maybe next he’d- “Next-up, the knock-out bullets. Try them on me.” Leander said. Roland blinked, then felt a chill creep up his neck. “Wait a minute, are you seri-” “You have to test how they work.”

The Junior Consul simply said and walked forward. “Turn the knob on the back of the Lofty doll- it’ll emit smoke that’ll dispel the effect.” He… was worried, honestly. “What if it doesn’t work?” “I wouldn’t bring it to you if there was any chance of failure.” If Leander was literally offering himself as a test subject… Roland sighed and fixed a bullet into the gun he summoned, blinking rapidly. This was surreal.

The Junior Consul was completely unfazed at being pointed at by a gun. This was surreal. Roland was still blinking, jaws fixed into a grimace. “I’m so sorry, Leander.” This was surreal. “You can do this, Roland.” He trusted Leander. Deep breath. He pulled the trigger.

A crack. Leander fell over. Oh gods. He was able to catch the other before his head hit the ground. Oh gods, oh gods, this was very, very real. It didn’t look like he was breathing. Oh gods. He- the Lofty doll. Roland grabbed it, turned the knob and set it on the floor. Oh gods, please work. Please work- The doll exploded in a burst of green smoke, then the Junior Consul jolted, coughing and sputtering.

Oh gods, Roland thought as he stared down, trying to calm himself. After a moment, pressure on his chin- he was led to look up. Leander was frowning, his expression softening soon after. “I’m sorry. I was shown the effects of the knock-out bullets- I was confident it would work.” “It’s- it’s okay.” Roland pinched between his brows. “Should’ve had more faith.” “Mm. Tell me when you feel ready.”
They continued sitting on the floor. It didn't seem like the others heard the gunfire. Now that he was sure that it worked, the sense of panic soon passed, replaced by a question. “Why did you make it look like Lofty, Leander?” “It wasn’t my idea.” Roland couldn’t help but raise his eyebrows. “If you say so.”

Roland exhaled and stood up. “Alright. Let’s try this frog candy.” The Junior Consul followed. “In that case, wait a moment. There’s a few things I need to set up.” “What things?” “A telepathic link. We still need to communicate while you’re being a frog.”

---

“Ahem. Can you hear me?” Leander stared. “There’s too much static from your side. It’s okay, this is your first time trying this. Try to focus and think.” They probably looked like they were having the most intense staring contest of the century, Roland mused. A cough from the other side of the telepathic link. “I won’t deny that.” “You heard?” “Yes.” “Damn it.”

Roland picked up the piece of candy. “I’ve decided to fix the same telepathic ability into these ribbit-drops in case anything happens. There will be a limit to how far apart from which you can communicate, however, as with what we have now.” Leander added. “Anything happens- as in?” “Say, there’s people who were loyal to the Dellian royalty and want to take the chance to escape.” “I get you.”

Down the hatch, then… He unwrapped the candy and popped it into his mouth, swallowing. Almost immediately, he could feel a strange wobbling travelling down his back- he shuddered and closed his eyes. A burst of static from the other end of the telepathic link, then carefully suppressed laughter. “Heh.” What was- when he opened his eyes, everything was too large. He looked up- Leander was towering over him, trying to keep in a smile.

“What?” Roland thought, and any hints of Leander’s smile vanished. “Ahem. Hm. It looks like it worked.” Another burst of static while Leander brought out a mirror. “You should... take a look at yourself.” Roland looked in it- and stared at a blue frog with... eyebrows and somehow, a tuft of hair on the top of its head. Of course, its right front leg- dark purple in coloration- stood out from the rest of its body.

“What the hell is this, Leander?” “Our previous experiments showed that whenever the ribbity-drop is used, the enchantment would reflect some of the... more indicative characteristics of the user. For you... it seems to be... heh.” “...you’re having the time of your life, aren’t you?” The Junior Consul’s brows knitted briefly. “No.”

Roland tried to raise his limbs, then hopped once. “At least I can jump... Gah. I can’t believe this is happening. I’m a frog talking to you through a telepathic link. Keeping telepathy for later would be a good idea, though, considering what we’ll be doing.” “I agree. It will take a lot of cooperation.” Toby had hovered closer- the Higgledie had the habit of lounging around while he worked- and stared at Roland, who currently wasn’t much larger. “Toby... Toby, no.” The Higgledie stared, almost... smiling maliciously. “Toby-” Roland felt himself being lifted into the air- he flailed, yelling inwardly, then- “Ribbit!”

Laughter from the other end of telepathy- Leander wasn’t even bothering to hide the mental hysteries anymore. How the hell was the Junior Consul keeping such an unfazed expression despite that? “Get down here and help me already!” Roland thought. Leander knelt and nudged Toby, who squeaked in objection. “Come on, now.” The frog-Consul touched ground again, and the Higgledie flew off in a huff. Leander watched, looking mildly amused, as Roland hopped closer.

“Grab a ribbidrop and join me if you’re having that much fun, Leander.” “No. Someone needs to
keep watch on you. We can’t afford to be both stuck as frogs if the enchantment doesn’t dissipate on its own.” “Dammit.”

Chapter End Notes

I mean, they can't just bring items in without knowing whether they work, right?

Thank you for reading Chapter 69! It's a tiny bit of a breather chapter. I heard that the bullets and Lofty bots were Bracken's work, so our Junior Consul probably went through the same thing lol. Something like Bracken voice: hold the doll Leander *bang*

And yes, telepathy shenanigans. If you go back up and read again, imagine the static to be the mental equivalent of a keyboard smash.

It's getting back to serious counter-spy activity next chapter, so sit tight!
Two hours later, the wobbling feeling returned, and Roland found himself back as a human, half-crouching on the floor. The sense of someone watching over his shoulder disappeared until Leander tapped on his head again. “The other ribbity pills were produced as the same time as this, so we can assume they have similar periods of effect.” The two straightened up. Leander walked to the table and concluded, “I believe our experiments were successful.”

Roland raised his hand to his chin. “Then we’ll be able to proceed with our next phase. I’ll be right back.”

---

Niall had never been careful about his documents, even with the various times they had warned him. They were simply scattered lazily on his desk- he’d claimed the conference room for himself when the throne room became where most meetings were held- and while the elder greenling snored (greenlings would begin to drowse as soon as the sun set), Roland checked how the Minister of Finance arranged the papers, holding a light-emitting charm.

There it was- this month’s financial reports, right on the top. Roland suppressed the urge to sigh and grabbed them, hurrying out of Niall’s room and returning to his. He made sure to make the papers visible- there was an Eye in the corridor that would catch his movements. “Got it.” Leander frowned. “That quickly? I will make a note to remind Minister Niall.” Roland nodded, and out of curiosity, looked at the report. On the first page: Proposal- Build Casino. Only on the last page was there a checklist of income and expenses. The Junior Consul watched as Roland groaned and stacked the few pieces of paper again.

“You look like you’re used to this.” “He does this every month. There’s a reason why I'm stealing them in particular.”

---

“Aye swear- aye had it right on my table!” Niall said the next day. “Not that there’s really much of note on it, other than my idea to get a-” “Denied.” Roland crossed his arms. “How many times do we need to tell you this, old man?”

“Do you think you can write up another report?” Evan asked. “While we’re certain of our expenses and so on, we still need to keep a record.” “Aw, shucks… fine, I’ll do it.”

Honestly, Roland felt bad about picking on the elder, but well, it was necessary. Either way… “So I guess we don’t have much to do for today’s meeting.” Tani said.

---

He made sure to head to the storage room underneath the personal rooms while the sky pirates changed shifts- it so happened that Tyran was making appearances again, and Batu had taken care to have his fellow men patrol the kingdom to make sure the bandit wasn’t… stealing food, apparently.

"I'm in position." “Okay.” Their plan: hand over the documents in the evening when the pirates were changing shifts, steal more during the dead of the night.
Leander teleported into the room, on the opposite side of the table, wearing a hooded robe. The placement of the hostile mini-Eye in this room meant that whoever was looking only saw Roland’s face and Leander’s back.

“I am glad to see that you have already produced results since our deal.” Leander recited, magic warping his voice to a deep baritone. “Now, may I see it…” “Hold it. Payment first.” Leander pretended to sigh and drop a small bag on the desk- containing the ribbity drops. Roland grinned, and took out the report, sliding it over the desk. The Junior Consul in disguise picked it up, and after a moment, nodded. “This is satisfactory. As long as you bring something of worth, you will be paid well.” “Mm-hm.” Roland reached his arm across the table, and the two Consuls shook hands. “Well, this is a good start. Let’s hope for more transactions.” “We shall.”

Leander disappeared, and after tucking away the bag, Roland headed out of the room. “Doesn’t seem like anyone saw us.” “But the spy did.” “Yeah. They’ll notice eventually.”

---

“Aye swear, aye had it written! It’s just- it’s gone! It was right there in the room when I went to sleep- I had it put right on top o’ the pile! And when I woke up this morning, it’s gone!” Niall lamented, and Roland crossed his arms. “You sure you haven’t gone senile with age?”

“No! Aye- someone must’ve stolen it!” Niall exclaimed. Aha. “Gotta be Tyran- he’d be a sneaky fellow wanting to torment me!” “Stolen?” Leander hummed. “This is quite the serious accusation.” “Don’t ye fret, Niall. I’ll get my crew to stay around yer place.” Batu huffed, “Although I agree- ye haven’t gone senile, have ye?”

Niall pretended spitting at the Cloud Snake, and after some more discussion on Tyran and what to do about him, the meeting ended on an amused, but tenser note.

---

“This is… the exact same report as yesterday.” Leander said, pushing the paper back across the desk. “I did not mark you as someone crafty, Roland Crane.” “Look, I didn’t know. It was dark, so-” “No excuses. You and my liege agreed that you would be paid as long as you are useful. If you do not intend to follow the rules, we-”

“Look, look.” Roland crossed his arms. Hastily. “I’ll try to get something different. Just come in tomorrow- same place, same time.” The Junior Consul hummed. “Very well. We shall see.”

No one was even near the area they were in. “Guess I can only take comfort from the fact the spy’s seeing this.” Roland thought, feeling the twinge of self-consciousness. “Although now that someone’s guarding Niall’s room…” “You’ll need to find your sources elsewhere.” “Yeah.”

There were two problems: the one that they had mentioned, and also the fact that even though the spy saw it, he still needed someone to find him out. The sky pirates… Something clicked. “You’re not going to their lounge, are you?” “I was the one to inform them of the skirmish Batu planned this afternoon-” And he’d left it there for the others to take reference- some of them were literate. “I could go there and grab the booklet while they’re out changing shifts.” “You could be in danger if you are exposed.” “Well, that’s the point, isn’t it?”

In case the sky pirates went on a hunt for him, there was plenty reason to banish himself, or in other words, get out of Evermore before he got thrown off a cliff. A long pause, then a begrudging sigh came from the other end of the link. “Just… don’t get yourself lynched early.” “Gotcha.”
Roland voice: wake up get up get out there

Thank you for reading chapter 70! I've kind of found it weird that the sky pirate would instantly think that Roland was a traitor, so I thought I'd do a bit of pacing. Unfortunately this also means act 7 is a bit longer than the others in this fic but I sure hope it works out in the end, haha.
Influence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It felt almost ironic that a sky pirate dropped by to inform him of the patrol schedules with a word of warning to not be outdoors during then in case he was suspected. Because, of course, he would make use of the knowledge to sneak down to the sky pirates’ lounge, and wait behind it until the ones inside had left. After all, they wouldn’t expect someone as cowardly as Tyran was to be hiding in the most dangerous places.

He went in the currently empty lounge, and after a bit of searching, found the booklet where he had put it. Nice. He stored it, then headed out of the place-

“M-mister Chief Consul?” Oh, hell- in the dim light, he could recognise the sky pirate- Munokhoi, in charge of the gardens. A man who was bad with conversation. A relief. “Oh, hello, Munokhoi.” “W- what are you doing here, uh, mister Chief Consul?” “You seen Khumbish or Chingis anywhere? I heard they were going out to ambush Tyran- I thought maybe they would appreciate an extra hand helping them out.”

The frightened expression on Munokhoi’s face seemed to lighten, but he still looked spooked. “Oh… uh, you’re too late. They headed out last shift, with Boss and the other flighters.” Of course- Roland was there to watch as the crew left together. “I see. Too bad, I guess.” “I’ll- I’ll escort you back to your suite?” “Sure. Thanks.”

Once Munokhoi saw to it that Roland was back in his room and left, Roland felt the telepathic link turn on as the two consuls got in range. “I got the booklet, but Munokhoi saw me.” A fizzle of static from the other end. “Wha-” “It’s fine- it’s good, actually. He’s bad with people, so he’ll rather check things out himself first before spreading word. Just what we needed.” “I see.”

---

“Thank you, Niall. It must’ve been pretty tiring for you to have to write the report three times.” Evan said as the Minister of Finance wrung his hands. “Ye should know! My arms are still sore from all that writing!”

“There’s some upsettin’ news for ye-all, though.” Batu stepped forward. “Yesterday I brought my crew to Tyran’s camp in the middle o the night- but we found him ‘nd got his word that he’d never sent anyone to steal papers from Evermore. ‘nd knowing him, he and his bandits don’t know a single letter, so…”

An ominous silence hung over the room before Evan coughed. “W-well, it’s still possible that Niall just lost his papers, right?” “Hm.” Batu was frowning. “It’s possible.” Then he stepped back. Knowing Batu, if he knew anything about who the thief was, he’d at least give an angry remark about it. So Munokhoi hadn’t told him… yet.

Just what they needed.

---

When Roland went to the storage room that evening, he was aware of the brief bouts of scuffling behind him. Hook, line and sinker...
Leander appeared in the room, robed as usual, and Roland passed the booklet while watching around the open door. A hat poked out from the edge. He recognized the green-orange pattern on it and made sure to show the cover so Munokhoi would see it.

“This is what you need, right?” Roland asked, and Leander took it, flipping through it and humming. “So you managed to acquire it.” The Junior Consul placed the bullets on table, and Roland took and flipped one of them, remembering to smirk like a villain. “Not that I expected any less of you, Mister Crane. You are nothing but dependable.”

Munokhoi was moving closer, and Roland caught the bullet in his hand. “Hm! Yeah… that’s me. We good to go, then?” “Get ready to teleport, Leander.” “Understood.” Roland looked beyond Leander, at Munokhoi, then improvised. “Who’s there?!” He yelled, and Munokhoi jolted, turning around. Leander disappeared in a flash.

The Chief Consul chased the sky pirate out of the storage room, summoning his gun and pointing it at the retreating figure. Munokhoi was as fast as ever, but that was good. Step two of the plan was almost done.

---

“You’re worried.” Leander sent that night. Roland sighed. “…yeah. I feel bad for everyone. Once the news get out, they’re probably be wondering what the hell is up with me.” “You did say that you only needed to fool the spies and Mausinger. By that, you trusted that they would find out quickly and act along.” “Still.” “You can’t afford to have second thoughts about this anymore.” “I know.”

He tried focusing on the positive. “Well, once the spy decides to show up for greetings, it’s an easy job of tracking down the spy to their base- they're missing for that bit of time, after all. Hm. If they have any. If they buy into my acting.” He rested his forehead on the desk with a thump. “Gah.” “I’d advise not dwelling on it, then.”

---

The next morning, Roland could immediately feel daggers being stared through him by Batu as he entered the throne room. “Stay calm, Roland.” “I know.”

He listened as Bracken reported that the updates to most of the facilities had been finished, and they would be future-proof. “I have to say, Bracken, things have come impressively far, impressively fast since you arrived in town.” He commented, and the Minister of Ingenuity grinned, “Of course they have! That’s my job!” Leander nodded. “Bracken is an asset, indeed. But we’ve made precious little headway in other questions- not least the question of how to encourage Ding Dong Dell to sign the Declaration.” “Saying it for the Eyes, huh?” “Shush.”

Evan nodded. “Yes… We can’t get close to them, let alone convince them to hear us out. And with the resurrection of the Horned One surely growing closer every passing day, we can’t afford to let differences divide us.”

Batu was still staring fiercely at him, Roland realised. “Leander, do you want to break the news?” “Ah.” Leander cleared his throat. “There’s something I’d like to-”

A loud fluttering noise. The six turned towards the entrance of the castle. “It can’t be…” Bracken muttered, “Zip?” A crackle from outside, and then they heard a voice, slightly distorted from being spoken through a loudspeaker.

“Hey guys! Room for one more?” Zip yelled from outside, announcing that things were to be
delayed for a short while.

Chapter End Notes

Hey I hit a 100k words time to stop that's all folks thanks for reading

jkjk Thank you for reading Chapter 71! As I've said many many times before, I've never written this much, and I'm really happy to see this happen! We've just got a big push ahead of us, and I really hope I can keep up the pace!

Once again, things are going to get shaken up a little bit in this act, so sit tight!
“That was quite an entrance, Zip.” Bracken muttered as the Broadleaf President strolled into the castle. “To what do we have the pleasure?” “Well, we’ve just finished repairs in Broadleaf, so… I thought maybe I could come offer you guys a little help.” Zip spread his arms out with a flourish. “That’s right: the greatest brain in all the world is looking out for you! Lucky you, right? And my first gift to you will be free use of the Zippelin! Fly, my friends- the skies are yours now!”

“You mean…” Evan’s ears perked up. “Your airship? Really?” “Oh, that’ll be amazing!” Tani exclaimed. “Think how many of us will be able to cram into that thing! And we’ll be able to fly around without any wind!” “That’s right, kiddo!” Zip grinned proudly. “And since I’ve upgraded the old girl with a miniaturised perpetual fission reactor, she’s zippier than ever, in all senses of the word!”

Zip… hey, wait. Didn’t the airship have a…

“Oh no.” “Oh no.” Roland crossed his arms and looked away. “Uh… yeah, I was about to mention that.” An awkward atmosphere had descended on the throne room. Lofty blew a raspberry. “Ha! Zippy’s right, mun, that thing’s got his great ugly mug plastered all over the front of it!” “Oof, I was trying not to think about that…” Tani added. Leander joined in the protest with a “I had wondered if this might be… something of an issue…”, Batu nodded, and Bracken simply shrugged.

“Ugly mug?!” Zip retorted, taken aback. “You all’ve got to be kidding- I’ll have you know this is one of the most mathematically well-proportioned faces ever studied! Right, Evan?” The young king smiled politely. “I must say, I wonder if it might be less… conspicuous without the face on the front. Ahem.” “You too?! You’re breaking my heart here!”

As Zip looked at Bracken for backup, she shrugged again. “Zip, it’s not just about what it looks like: did you ever think about air resistance? That thing must cause one heck of a drag. Sorry, but it’s coming off.” She turned, waving a hand for the others to follow her out of the castle. “Come on, time to go to work!”

They walked out on Zip, who hurried after them. “B- wait! Not the face, anything but- man!”

---

Within an hour or two, the face clunked onto the ground, and once Zip had resigned to the fact that it was gone (after much lamenting), the two engineers fitted multiple gadgets onto the airship, eventually transforming it into one headed with panes and fans, fortified by metal.

“It looks very impressive!” Evan commented. “Thank you, Zip.” “You’re very welcome… well, uh. Mind if I ask for a favor?” Zip scratched his head. “I… well, now that I gave you the Zippelin, I don’t have a ride home, kind of. Would you take me back to Broadleaf? Anyplace around is fine- as long as I don’t have to walk the whole way. Call it a test flight.” “Alright!” “Thanks, pal!”

Zip was not kidding when he said the airship (“Airship… aierzip?” “Yes, but may I ask: why would you fathom that?”) would zip around the world. Within hours, they had cleared the distance from Evermore, over the sea to Broadleaf. Zip stepped off the ziplin, and waved before returning to the Treehouse.
“Righto, me hearties!” Batu announced. “Homeward we go!” “Oh yeah- Leander was about to tell us something when Zip dropped by, right?” Tani asked, and the Junior Consul nodded. “We shall return home first.”

---

“Now… as for the matters I wished to speak about.” Leander said, back in the Evermore throne room. “I suppose you are in the know about recent incidents of… resources being unaccounted for. Unfortunately, we have received reports of a suspicious, hooded character being sighted. This is a cause for concern.”

“A robed swab, ye say? An’ a shady sort to boot? Hm…” Batu crossed his arms. “We’ve got a thief among our number, eh? Not good, not good at all…” The Cloud Snake glanced at Roland, and Roland’s heart skipped a beat. Steady, and be the shady villain. He mimicked Batu’s gesture and stared back. “Not good, not good.” Evan raised a hand to his chin in the meanwhile. “Could there be really be people in our kingdom that does such things? I suppose the robed person would be able to tell us.” “Guess it can’t be helped.” Bracken commented. “I’ll get to updating security here; hopefully we’ll catch this thief soon.”

“What say we convene us a little pow-wow to talk about how to catch this pilferer of ours, hm? Tonight, after dinner, perhaps?” Batu was on a roll. “After all, ‘tis best to strike while the iron’s hot with matters like these- wouldn’t ye say, Roland, lad?”

Improvisation. “Sorry, can’t make it. Got to catch up on sleep, work’s been pretty tough.” Of course, for matters as critical as national security, it was both irresponsible and suspicious for the Chief Consul to say it. “If it’s urgent, feel free to go on without me.” He could hear Batu growl, but Evan had approved of his absence. “Very well, Roland- enjoy your rest. You deserve it.” “Thanks, Evan.” Whether it was because of his intention to act as shady as possible, a sharp pang of guilt at Evan’s friendly response or Batu’s bristling, he really didn’t want to stay. “I’ll excuse myself, then.”

---

Thankfully, the discussion on the thief didn’t last into the night as Batu had threatened, and once the two met up in the room, they came to an agreement to hurry it up in case someone noticed that both of them were missing. This time, Roland passed over one of the old, outdated drafts of documents he managed to find after turning his room upside down.

“I must thank you again for providing us with the items and information we require, Roland.” Leander said, passing over the flash grenade and the glasses. Roland took them and stored them away. “Don’t mention it. Let me know if there’s anything you need.” “Hm. There’s one thing I have been meaning to ask: why do you serve a fledgling of a realm populated by bandits and vagabonds? Surely there are places better suited to your talents.”

Roland smiled. “I gotta say, I am used to working on a bigger stage. Maybe it’s time I went someplace more… interesting. ’Enemy’ is a relative term, after all…” Hell, he’d spit at his own words. Leander smiled from under his hood. “Sage words indeed. Well, you have done more than enough to earn our gratitude. Should you ever wish for a… change of scenery, you would be welcome to join us.” With that nail hammered into the coffin, Leander teleported away.

Roland stood there for a while before making his way out. There was no one at all. “I’m… surprised that Batu hasn’t charged into the room and apprehended us two minutes ago, Leander.” “You’re right. This is rather irregular.” “Maybe he didn’t want a two-on-one fight? But he could’ve brought the other pirates… hm.”
Maybe he should get back his room first.

---

The more the two consuls discussed about it over telepathy in their separate rooms, the more it didn’t make sense. Then a knock on the door. Roland went and opened it, and there was a piece of paper. A sigil of a moon, then a clock with its hour hand pointing to two, and then a rough sketch of a throne.

"Roland, what's wrong?" "I got a message. To go to the throne room at two after midnight." "It could be the spy… or someone else." "I know, I have to go." "That's beyond telepathic range. I'll watch your back." "Don't! I can't afford to have you caught up in this spy fiasco in case it's someone trying to smoke me out." A sense of static. "Stay safe." "I will."

Chapter End Notes

No, not the kind you see in Detroit, I know it's trending rn.

Thank you for reading chapter 72! I guess as much as I didn't like how the spy act went from 0 to 100 real quick, there's a lot of wiggle space so I could get an event in or two, haha.

Batu probably rolled high on that stealth.
A clock chimed twice somewhere down the corridor, echoing faintly into the throne room, where Roland had been staying behind one of the pillars. He stepped into the open. A movement further away caught his attention, but he could recognize the silhouette in the dark. “Batu.” The Cloud Snake did not say anything, only walking closer. The throne room was empty except the two. “I hope you haven’t set an ambush with you and your-”

Roland felt himself picked up by the collar of his coat and swung around, back pressing against one of the pillars. His feet were nearly hanging off the ground. Tension in his eyes as he tried to look in the dark.

“Yer a damned idiot, Roland.” Batu snarled loudly. “Ye think I couldn’t see through ye and yer little act?” A rustle behind Roland as fabric scraped against stone. “Where are yer other spies, huh?!” In his shock, Roland was at a loss for words. Did Batu really buy into this bad acting? The Cloud Snake leaned in- Roland’s heart thundered- and whispered quickly in a hushed, quiet tone.

“Look, kid, I know what ye’re doin’. Ye’ve been actin’ weird since Leander brought up that thing about gettin’ into Ding Dong Dell. Ye tryin’ do that, eh?” Oh. Batu suddenly growled and shouted, “I says, where ARE yer spies?”

Oh. If it wasn’t for the worry that the Eyes had night vision, Roland would’ve grinned. Batu sighed and muttered. “I bet the robed lad’s Leander, ye little shits... Look, ye want me to pitch in my bit or nah?” He was already helping, Roland thought, but... he whispered back. “Yes please.” “Alright. I owe ye one.” What? Roland owed Batu one- A sense of vertigo, and suddenly Roland was rolling along the carpet- and then Batu growled. Then pressure as he was pinned down on the floor- a boom resounded in his ears as his face was whipped to the left by a punch. Oh. “Gah!”

The two men fought- well, it would look like it, with Batu throwing punches and Roland trying his best to block them or put on an act of returning a few. It went on for a minute, then- “Dad?! What are you doing?” Tani’s voice. Everyone paused and looked as the pirate girl stood around the corner. Batu growled. “It’s none of ye business, girlie. Head back to bed.” “It is my business! Who’s- oh crikey, is that Roland?!” Tani was- of course. Of course. Batu growled, then stood up. “Let’s go back.”

Roland waited until the two had disappeared from view before sitting up. Wow- ouch. He raised a hand to the side of the face where the punch had landed, and promptly winced as even a touch sent a sharp pain across it. He got up, wobbly, and slowly walked back to his room.

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He was surprised to find Leander standing in his room, and the Junior Consul spun around when Roland stumbled through the half-open door. “Brineskimmer’s fins.” Leander hurried over, grimacing, and closed the door while Roland moved aside to lean on the wall- from the stinging and throbbing, he could expect his face to bruise pretty badly tomorrow. “Let me see-”

He intercepted Leander’s hand. “Batu figured it out.” “I had a feeling it was him- why are you smiling? Are you knocked on the head?” “No- no. He’s got it completely figured out: my acting, the Eyes-” He grinned, sending a fresh stab of pain through his face. “-he guessed the robed guy was
you.” Leander blinked. “I thought the vocal distortion was sufficient.” “Heh. Either way, the fight was for the spies to see, so I’ll have to keep the bruise. For tomorrow. It also means you can enlist Batu’s help in pinning them down.” A pause, and Leander raised his hand, a green glow enveloping it. “Then let me heal the cut, at least. It looks painful.” “It’s fine-” The thrumming ache lessened. “Thanks.”

Once Leander stepped back, Roland found a question nudging at his mind. “Why are you here?” “Some final adjustments. Give me the glasses.” He did, and Leander took out another pair, moving to the table. Roland followed him. “How many pairs of glasses-” “I had been wondering what I could have you bring to Ding Dong Dell so that we could time the deactivation of the hostile Eyes here and catching the spy.” A flash of light from runes on the table. “When you’re beginning your escape, break the glasses you have. I’ve fixed a synchronisation spell to it- I’ll know. Your hand, please.”

Leander dropped a grey, tadpole-like creature into it. “This is a locketyclicker- it can shapeshift into any key when shown a keyhole. Considering you’ll be taking your leave tomorrow, I’m glad I am able to conjure this in time.” A pause, and Leander looked up, brows knitting together. “You already know this, but… once you leave Evermore, you are on your own.” “You’ve done everything you can.” Roland smiled, patting the Junior Consul’s shoulder. “We can do this. We will do this.”

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“So, Roland- get up to much last night, did ye?” Batu asked the next morning before the meeting started. Roland kept his hand carefully on his face to hide the punch as he walked closer. “Meet with… any interesting characters?” “Last night? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Batu snarled. “Spare us your lies, traitor! You’re fixing to leave our little kingdom behind for bigger and better! Don’t bother to deny it!”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on.” Bracken was saying, but Evan stood up from his throne. “Roland?! Surely not!” “Surely so, lad! Or did ye think it was a coincidence that our precious resources only go missing on this treacherous dog’s watch? And what o’ the shady feller in the cloak he met with this past evenin’, just an old pal come for a chinwag, eh? Explain it, why don’t ye, Mister President?!”

“There’s got to be some mistake, Leander.” Evan said. The Junior Consul pushed up his glasses. “One should not rush to judgement on hearsay alone… but I must say, this is irregular.” The young king’s brows came together for a moment.

“There ye have it!” Batu yelled. “Now slang yer hook before I slang it for ye, scurvy swine!” Aha.

Roland lowered his hand, showing the bruise that had only gotten darker in coloration after the hours. “You already did. So that’s how much trust I’ve earned after all this time, huh? Good to know. Maybe I am better off someplace else.” “Golly, what does he think he’s doing?!” Tani replied, but Evan simply watched on, frowning and hand on chin.

Should hit the steel when it’s hot. Roland turned around and headed towards the exit. “HE AS GOOD AS ADMITS IT!” Batu roared, raising his arms.

He was halfway down the corridor when Evan ran past him and stood between the (former) Chief Consul and the exit, then grabbed Roland’s hands with his. “Please don’t leave!” A pang of guilt, then a strange, yet minute scratching feeling on the side of his left hand- then Roland realised they were letters. Capital letters.

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- ATUE BEDROM. Statue… bedroom. Evan’s thumb moved quickly, but with movements so small it only looked like shaking fingers, the young king was tracing a hint on his hand with the side of his nail. Plus, he had his back to one of the Eyes- Roland likely blocked the other’s with the height
difference.

He blinked slowly, once, then took his hand away. “So long… Evan.”

As Roland marched out of the castle, he could hear Evan yell “NO!” behind him. He hurried out of Evermore. None of the sky pirates did so much as glance at him as he did.

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Footsteps behind him, and he turned around. Wind rustled golden glades of grass around him. He had left Toby behind—despite much reluctance, Roland managed to convince the Higgledie that if there were anyone who can see the Higgledie, it would blow his cover—so he was solitary.

“And where do you think you’re going?” The strange man asked. “Going to walk to Ding Dong Dell by yourself?” So his acting wasn’t all that bad. Roland crossed his arms. “You saw that?” “Of course, and some more. Hmhm… Forgive me, Chief Consul. Or… former Chief Consul.”

“What do you want with me?” Roland asked. “To engage your services, of course. You have information that will be quite useful to us.” “Quite the offer.” “Don’t be coy: where else can you go? Every other large empire have united under that pesky banner.” “That’s true… but what benefits are in it for me?” “Plenty, sir… plenty. If you are willing, I can bring you to my master right away—only people like me are given access to the tripdoors, after all.”

So he managed to land on his feet. “Sure.” The spy walked closer and grabbed the former Chief Consul’s arm. Blue blinding light filled his view and he was forced to close his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 73! Yes, I turned it into a team effort of sorts: the three went ‘Yeah, there’s no flippin’ way.” And just hopped on the ride.

As early as when Niall was getting his forest back, I’ve kind of had the punch in mind as Batu’s reaction to Roland’s counter-spy activities, but then entire two arcs happened, and with what I mentioned before about outsiders expecting a tough-looking bloke like Batu to start fights, well, it ended up happening in this context. Definitely not a bad thing, haha.

But with this, we’re finally out of Evermore! Sit tight my folks this is gonna be a damn ride and back.
Roland opened his eyes. The main hallway of Ding Dong Dell Castle greeted him. Two statues of mice gargled water on the sides of the stairway, and he snorted. A bit too ready to make it known mice ruled the place, huh? Although the decorations around the walls were still of fish...

“Just head up the stairs, sir.” The spy said. “I must return to Evermore- I shall hope that your conversation with His Majesty proves fruitful.” With that, the man was gone in a flash of blue. Do your job, everyone. Roland took a breath and went up to the throne room.

“Mister Crane.” Mausinger sat on the Dellian throne as the man stepped into view. “What a pleasure. It seems an age since we last met- so much has happened since I took my rightful place on the throne.” Roland bowed. “Your Majesty.”

“So this is the famous Roland!” A stout mouse from next to him in blue and with twirly whiskers for a mustache spoke up. Roland remembered seeing the fellow during the coup- “Well, well, well! I am Chancellor Vermine. Charmed, I am sure!” Vermine nodded. “I have been following your work with great interest. To have made almost a viable ruler of some kid like Evan is quite the feat- a sterling achievement, yes!”

“I remember very well how you thwarted my designs for our young friend.” Mausinger continued, “But rest assured, I bear you no ill will on that account.” The rat-ferret king pinched his goatee. “I have been watching your nature. Your actions. I have decided that you and I can come to an arrangement.”

Alright. “Glad to hear it. It’s nice of you to get straight to the point.” Roland crossed his arms. As he’d demonstrated before… “My terms are simple: power. And a little money. Give me those, and I’ll give you anything.” Could he risk it? “I’ll even give you Evan.” “Perhaps not so fast, but…” Mausinger squinted, smiling. “I believe in making best use of the talents of those under my employ. First, I shall test your loyalty. Vermine?” “Yes, Your Majesty.”

The Chancellor stepped closer. “Your arms band, please. I shall test it for any… prying magics.” Oh, hell. Roland took it off and passed it over. Thank the forces above he hadn't asked to take a Prying Eye along. Vermine tapped it, and a glow came from the arms band. The chancellor frowned and scrunches up his face. “While there is… an abundance of swords, guns and strange items, there is nothing of the spying sort.” Mausinger’s smile grew wider. “Very well. My guards shall take you to your room. There shall be another test tomorrow, but first, we must make sure you are comfortable.”

A guard stepped into the throne room. Mausinger stood up, tugging at his goatee. “May this be a good start to our cooperation, Mister Crane.” “Same to you.”

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They assigned Roland to a room in the east wing- where Evan’s room also was. He wouldn’t begin to question whether it was on purpose. He sat down at the desk on one side of the room and sorted out his current situation.

Mausinger being the director of the coup meant that he would be aware of similarly devious
characters. So far, Roland hadn’t done much to arouse the usurper’s suspicion, but the test he spoke of… it left a bad taste in his mouth. It would take *something* for him to gain Mausinger’s trust, that much he could be certain. He wouldn’t be surprised if there was a Prying Eye somewhere in the room he was in, but, well, looking for it was the worst idea there was.

For now, Roland would have to lay low, and be obedient. If Mausinger wanted assistance to find the Mark, he would bring it up eventually.

His mind turned to Evermore. He wondered how they were doing. He wondered what they were thinking, now that the plan was fully underway. He hoped that they wouldn’t worry too much-

A knock on the door, and Vermine stepped into the room, followed by a cloaked mage. “How are you settling into the place, Mister Crane?” The mage walked closer- they couldn’t have figured it out already, could they? Roland managed a smile. “Fine. It’s comfortable, like His Majesty said. It’s nice of you to check on me.”

The mage raised a staff at his face. What the- “That certainly looks painful.” Vermine commented as Roland became aware that he hadn’t treated the bruise yet. The dull sensation halted. “A parting not on the best of terms?” Roland moved his jaw before answering. “Nope. The pirate punched me. Tch.” “In that case, you’ll have somewhere to vent your anger soon.” Vermine smiled. Ominously, Roland realised. “How so?” He asked, and the chancellor simply turned around. “You’ll see. It’s a surprise.”

Roland felt his brows knit together as the two left. He disliked being on the passive, but guess he had to wait.

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The next morning, Roland reported in at the Dellian throne room. Two more guards stood on the right.

“Good morning, Mister Crane.” Mausinger greeted. “Now, the test of loyalty- let us go together. Humor me on whether your loyalties are as fluid as you claim, shall we?”

The guards led them downwards- Roland tried his best to remember the route as it twisted and turned. Its destination was a circular chamber, with barred doors lining it. The prison dungeon. And in the one directly facing them-

Khunbish.

He couldn’t let the alarm show. But why was the sky pirate here, of all places?! The moment Khunbish saw the five, he stood up and rushed to hold the prison bars and started yelling.

“Roland, sir!” Roland couldn’t let Mausinger or Vermine know that they were acquainted. “You’re… one of Batu’s men.” “Aye, that I am!” Khunbish certainly looked happy to see him. Vermine stepped forward. “This gentleman was apprehended after being observed behaving suspiciously in our airspace. It is our belief that he is a spy.” “Curse ye, devils! Didn’t I say I was lookin’ fer a shipmate?”

Vermine said he could vent his anger… and the last time he interacted with a sky pirate… Oh. Roland pushed down the bubbling sense of dread and frowned at Khunbish. “You were looking for your men?” “Aye, Roland, sir!” Khunbish grinned. “Guess I made a blunder, yer honor!” “Of course you did.” Roland looked at Mausinger. “About the test…”

“Ah, yes.” The usurper king was smiling. “Dispatching one of your former allies should be
adequate proof that you are ready to serve a new master.” “W-what?!” Khunbish yelled, but Roland already knew what to do. He focused, looking for the sidearm he used when he first arrived in Ding Dong Dell in the arms band. The one from his world… the one fitted with the knock-out bullets.

The captive sky pirate gasped as Roland brought up the gun. “Roland, ye-” “What, Mister Crane?” Mausinger asked. “Surely you are capable of such a straightforward show of commitment? Or…” Roland steadied himself and aimed at Khunbish, walking towards the bars. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I have my own methods.” “Roland! Sir! No! We’re shipmates! Ye can’t just-” Khunbish backed up against the wall. “Sorry. It’s nothing personal.” Roland remembered to smirk after that statement. He knew how the bullets worked. “You’re just at the wrong place at the wrong time.” “Curse… curse ye! Curse ye for the traitor ye are-”

Roland fired- twice, and Khunbish crumpled. Mausinger chuckled from next to him, and the gun fizzled away into specks of light from his right hand. “Well? Happy now?” A change of plans were in order- Roland saw a glimpse of a waterway at the base of the cell before he shot. Mausinger stooped to watch as Khunbish’s eyes closed.

“Happy enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 74! I pretty much snorted when I saw those two mice statues. Unfortunately the same happens in Evermore eventually- must've found the same architect lol

Anyway!! This part of the act is pretty plot-tight, so I'll try to keep things quick? I guess. I'll get to explaining Khunbish's appearance later. Now that it's not because Batu sent someone to bring him back, there's a slightly different, less dramatic reason for that to happen.
Roland was granted full access to the castle- bar the part of the castle where Evan’s quarters would be, of course- after that display. Mausinger had ordered to simply let the sky pirate rot in the prison. He hoped no one was there to check how much Khunbish was decomposing. Soon enough, the desk of the room he was given held stacks of papers as he worked- as well as pretended to work through the nights.

Through the days of servitude, he was able to be certain of a few things. Mausinger was keeping most of the grimalkin under heavy surveillance, although Roland was not given more information than that. Tripdoor magic suppression was put in place a few months ago, reaching until Cloudcoil Canyon. Vermine was a slothful creature for a chancellor, happy to pile errands and other projects on Roland if the latter asked. The last of it was beneficial, as Roland slowly built his reputation of being Vermine’s ‘errand boy’, as he would joke to himself.

He found a Dreamer’s Door in one of the rooms of the Dellian castle when he was looking around for a guard. Combined with the page that he found when travelling to Broadleaf on his talent search, the strange diary was at five pages now. He made a mental note to read them when he got back.

It was on the fifth day when Mausinger brought up the topic of the Mark.

“To have formulated such a thorough strategy in so short of a time is… really quite impressive, I must say.” Mausinger had concluded. “It seems I was entirely justified in welcoming you into the fold, Mister Crane.” A pause. “Now, there is another favor I have been meaning to ask of you. You have heard of the Mark of Kings, yes?”

Oh, finally. “Sure. It’s handed down from generation to generation of Dellian kings as proof to right of rule.” He remembered what Evan said. “And it’s a key of sorts, correct?” Mausinger smiled. “Precisely. It is a pendant of the brightest, blazing red. And a necessity to enter our nation’s king’s cradle.”

“And let me guess: you don’t have it. You want it.” Roland could see the corners of Mausinger’s mouth curling up for a moment before the answer came. “You are as admirably concise as ever, Mister Crane. We’ve searched the castle high and low, but it seems that it is not here.” “It isn’t.” Roland lied, “It’s around Evan’s neck. He’s wearing it every minute, so it won’t be easy to get a hold of it.” He raised his hand to his chin before continuing, “Of course, that doesn’t mean it’s impossible. I’ll need a bit of time.”

Mausinger nodded. “Very well. You shall have all you need- there is no other who I can entrust such a task to, after all.” Roland turned to Vermine. “What about you, Your Excellency? Any tasks you’d like the new guy to run?” The Chancellor hummed before nodding. “That’s very kind of you. Now… I would be very much obliged if you would inform Captain Buck that the war council will be postponed.” Roland nodded, answering, “Sure, I’ll get on it.”

Finally, Roland repeated inwardly as he turned around. Give it a few more days, and the fatigue of being constantly on guard would’ve started getting to him.

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“Well, well! If it isn’t the famous Roland! The flavour of the month just after a few days, I’ve heard.” Captain Buck laughed heartily, shaking the armor he wore. “So. What business does someone so lofty have with a lowly soldier like me?”

“I’m here to pass a message from Chancellor Vermine.” Roland explained. “The war council will be postponed.” And here goes the extra spice. He brought out a piece of paper- one he’d written himself, previously hidden as a draft. “And there’s a change to the postings of some of the guards.” Captain Buck took it, and read it over. “All men posted in the east and west blocks are to patrol outside the castle instead, hm? A very mysterious change indeed, but it will be done, sir!” Roland nodded. “Good. I’ll count on you to pass the message along the guards.”

Now he just needed to get in and get out.

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Captain Buck was able to do his job: there were no guards in the east block, so it was an easy run up to where Evan once resided that night. A travel up memory lane. Reaching the top of the stairs, he pushed against the door- a jolt, then resistance. It was locked. He wasn’t surprised. There they go, then…

He brought out the lock-tadpole. It uncurled in his hand, revealing large, googly eyes. Actually a bit cute. “Take a look.” Roland whispered, showing the creature the keyhole. It looked left, looked right, turned around and wiggled. Then its body twisted, glowing briefly before transforming into a key. So that’s how it worked. He carefully fitted the tadpole-key and turned the lock, pushing the door. The lockety… thing wiggled again and disappeared in a puff of smoke. “Thanks, little guy.” Wow, even with the long months he’d been here, this world kept giving, huh?

Immediately, he could see a bust in the corners of the room- must be the statue Evan was talking about. Roland walked over and felt around the statue, eventually finding an indentation at its base. He pressed it, and something shuffled behind him. Turning around revealed that the entire bed had moved aside to show a hidden staircase. Wow, this world sure kept giving, Roland thought.

He took out the pair of glasses, putting it on. Always helped to be ready. He headed down the stairs.

The stairs led to a corridor, which led to a room much larger than he would have imagined. A dusty chest sat at the end of it. He opened it, revealing a sword. Underneath the sword… a small green pendant. He took both and stored them, straightening up. The latter should be the Mark-

Wait… green? Didn’t Mausinger say-

Footsteps behind him, and Roland spun around, only to feel himself stumbling back. Looking up revealed a mouse guard, holding a crossbow. Huh- then he glanced at his right arm. A shaft stuck out from it. (For just this once, he was thankful to the Horned One.) He faked a cry and gripped it with his left hand.

More clatters of footsteps as guards filed down the corridor, and he found himself grinning, despite the fact that he should look like he’d just been disarmed and cornered by some tens of guards.

“Very clever… using me to find this place.” Mausinger stepped forward from the band of guards at Roland’s declaration, as with Vermine. “Trust me when I say we have searched long and hard for the Mark.” The usurper king drawled. “I am disappointed, Roland Crane. To deceive one’s professed master is most uncivil.”
Tell yourself that, Roland thought as he found himself grinning wider.

“Heh. All’s fair in love and war- isn’t that what they say, Mausinger?”

Chapter End Notes

It was this or putting Roland through hell via crossbow wound. I know because I pretty much rewrote the entire section of his escape, ha. Virtues of being someone who's way too caught up in biological details.

Thank you for reading Chapter 75! I changed it over to the right arm because from the last chapter, Mausinger saw him fire the gun with his right, and honestly doing danger banter while your foe is still really kicking doesn't make sense lol. Too bad this guy's entire limb is a mess of magical energy held together by sheer willpower. Or something.

Also yes, Roland forgot what the name of the locketyclicker was.
Roland stood, still grinning as Mausinger stretched out his hand. “Now, give over the Mark, and I may spare your life.” “I don’t think so. It belongs to the king. My king.” He took a step forward, pretending to wince. “Of course, if you’re willing to sign the Declaration, I’ll be happy to arrange a trade.”

The rat king smirked. “You speak of this pathetic union, and yet you are hardly in any position to bargain- disarmed, cornered, trapped. Although I must say, I have not thought your young protege capable of such subterfuge that he would send a spy.” “He’s not going to poison his rivals— or shoot people in the back, but he’s coming along.” Vermine seemed to smirk at that, but Mausinger snarled. “Very droll. But you of all people should know that no dream can be achieved without making certain sacrifices along the way.” The ferret clenched his fist. “The revolution had to be done- and I will do it again in a heartbeat.”

He found it strange that no purple aura had started smoking out of Mausinger yet. “Sure you would. And what’s this ‘dream’ of yours, hm?” Roland asked. This prompted Mausinger to snarl again. “For far too long, our kind has suffered at the hands of the grimalkin. My dream is a simple one: to see our feline oppressors prostrate themselves at our feet.” As with Pugnacius, ambition like that should’ve already sent tendrils of purple from the ferret. Now Roland wanted to investigate. “Revenge, in other words?” “The name matters not, Mister Crane. My dream is now a reality- a new era beckons!”

Roland would push it. “If your kind were so downtrodden, how exactly did you wind up being King Leonhard’s chancellor?” Now he could see a wisp of purple- was it him or did it come from… from next to Mausinger? “Pah!” Mausinger spat. “He used me. I was the unwitting tool of my persecutor. A puppet to make my people more compliant!” Roland shrugged. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Mausinger.” Vermine flashed purple- aha. The chancellor turned to clumsily grab a crossbow, but Roland knew what to do.

Roland raised his right hand and snapped his fingers. A burst of gravity unbalanced the crowd before him. “Wh- what is this?!” Vermine yelled, crossbow dropping on the ground. “Great talk.” The flash grenade appeared in his right hand as Roland pulled the bolt from his arm and tossed it away. A shocked snarl from Mausinger- a tremor in the ground reminded him that he was here to get out, not bury himself and a few others in a dusty room. “I’ll be sure to pass your message along to His Majesty.”

Roland threw the blue oval orb upwards just as the gravity returned to normal. Yells around him as he ran through the light, upwards, out of the room, and down the stairs.

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He’d remembered about the glasses. Once he’d reached the base of the stairs, Roland took them off, snapped the legs off and threw the pieces aside as he kept running. He turned around the corner, into-

Into soldiers. Who promptly held their weapons out at him. “I don’t have time for you.” He found himself muttering, summoning a gun. They charged, and he fired. Blasts of purple. The soldiers
slumped over—then an orb of yellow appeared in front of him. He nearly fired at it as well, if he hadn’t noticed the blobby expression on its face. A Higgledie… from the flash bomb, perhaps. “Come along, sunshine.” Then he kept running.

By the time he reached the doorway leading to the dungeons, near the main hall, he had used up his soreaways. For the most part, he was able to throw off the close-ranged guards, but just as it was from his first arrival, mages were an absolute pain—there would be at least a few scorch marks on his coat where fireballs had barely missed him. A larger one on the lower hem when one did graze his leg and he ended up collapsing part of the ceiling above the pursuing guards with a desperate… something. One soreaway to remove the spiking stars in his eyes, three soreaways for him to pick himself up, two more to return to running pace—although it still made him wince as fabric shifted against skin. He remembered cracking the used pots on a few guards’ heads when they got dangerously close.

He parried a lance and turned into the narrower corridors, firing a gravity-imbued bullet behind him. A shout—hopefully that impeded the near-army of pursuers.

Roland remembered to summon the Lofty doll and held the knob as he turned it, setting it down the moment he reached the cell Khunbish was in. A burst of green smoke, then the sky pirate sat up, coughing and hacking. The frog drops.

“Roland! Ye traitor! Swine—” Roland blasted the bars open with a Heavy Ammo and stuffed the unwrapped candy into Khunbish’s mouth. “Eat it.” The sky pirate blinked. He could hear voices echoing from further up the corridor. “Now, Khunbish!” A glow of green, and Roland remembered to eat his. A familiar wobbly feeling, then the bars of the waterway were wide enough for him to jump through. And so he did.

Then the static filled his mind. Now that Roland had a few moments to collect his thoughts, he focused. “Calm down! Follow the blue frog—that’s me.” “Wh-what? What’s going—” Sighing inwardly, Roland hopped over to the waterway. A green frog with a red beret followed hesitantly, and from there, Roland turned to watch as two guards ran into the dungeons, Mausinger following fast after. Sunshine had ducked further into the waterway: the coast should be clear...

“Roland? I-is that yer voice?” Khunbish must’ve heard what he was thinking. Mausinger snarled at the twisted bars, then noticed the Lofty doll. “Damn you… Keep looking!” “Yes, Your Majesty!” And then the dungeons were vacant. Roland turned to face the pirate-turned-frog. Sunshine the Higgledie (who wore a pair of sunglasses, to Roland’s amusement) floated next to the two, glancing between them with curiosity.

“...wow. That was really close.” “Roland—what in the flippin’ blazes was that?!” “Frog-turning pills with added telepathy. Leander—Junior Consul’s idea.” “No, I mean—ye killed me!” “Then how are you talking telepathically, as a frog, to your murderer, who also happens to look like a frog right now? That’s oddly specific, don’t you think?” “I… er. But still! Ye shot me one second, then I was lookin’ at ye shovin’ me a candy down m’throat ‘nd tellin’ me to eat it the next!” “Bullets designed to make you look dead. Also Leander’s idea.” “How prepared were ye two?!” “Very.”

The clock was ticking. “We’ve got two hours before we’re two humans trying to run away from an army and I’ve got a leg to deal with. So start jumping. We can tell each other how we got ourselves into this mess on our way out.” “O-okay.”

To the eyes of the unwary soldiers, there would simply be two frogs hopping down a waterway. To the eyes of the more wary soldiers, there would simply be two frogs, strange in appearance, hopping down a waterway. But they were looking for humans—Mausinger’s orders were so, and there was little possibility that they would’ve gone in the sewers.
Right?

Chapter End Notes

Roland voice: haha got you but I gotta RUN

Thank you for reading chapter 76! I hope I'm getting Act 7 done well, haha, although now that we're like. 3/4s into the act. It's both very plot-tight at spots and then gives no information at all in others so it's a. oof thing.

Either way, that's gonna be one hell of a renovation fee lol
"So you were already caught before I got here." They were still hopping down the narrow sewers, and Roland took a moment to inwardly seek relief once more from the fact they had knockout bullets.

"Aye, t' check the defenses in Ding Dong Dell at night while Boss 'nd the crew were off punchin' out Tyran. Last time we went surveryin' at day, we went as a squad and nearly got torched, so we gotta get someone to go solo." The red beret bounced on the frog's head. "I got the job because I got a good sniff for stealth, mind ye- given time I probably would've snuck my way outta the castle."

"But you didn't expect me to show up and ended up getting used for a loyalty test." If Roland was in human form, he would've slapped his forehead. "Sorry for the scare, Khunbish." "We're good, matey. At least ye found what ye were lookin' for, 'nd we're still lookin' lively. But does the boss know that ye're fakin' the traitor act? He takes badly to traitors." "He figured that out, don't worry."

A sense of wind- they must be nearing the exit. There was a second question Roland wanted to ask. "So how were Dellian defenses?" "The same as day: they all sit squat right in front of Ding Dong Dell's doors, along the river." It matched up with what Roland could find on the matter: the troops concentrated south of Ding Dong Dell. "Hm."

Even as they hopped onto grass, it was dark- it must still be late night. The light Higgledie glowed gently, which Khunbish was quick to take up on. "A- a ghost?!" "Nah. It's a... What was the best way to put it? "...friendly ghost." Sunshine seemed to be looking behind the two with interest. A loud ribbit. "Was that you, Khunbish?" "No." Another ribbit- they turned to hop face-to-face with a frog, twice their size. It rumbled closer to the imposters, letting out a guttural croak. "Uh, Roland, sir, should we... move?" "Yes."

While they hopped forward at speeds previously unknown to them, the tremors in the ground kept them moving, screaming back and forth at each other through the telepathic link. Roland had never imagined himself to be afraid of a frog, of all things, but apparently it was possible.

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The wobbling feeling returned soon after the frog stopped trying to crush the imposters under its sheer weight. Roland straightened up, tried a step with his bad leg, and blinked the spots out of his eyes as his knee hit the grass.

Khunbish grabbed his left arm and the two half-walked, half-hobbled to a nearby shrub. "I see somethin' over near Cloudcoil- ain't too far off. I'm gonna scout." In the dim light provided by the Higgledie, Roland watched as Khunbish lowered two pots of soreaway on the grass next to him. Oh yeah, the monsters... Roland raised his hand, one of the many swords kept in storage appearing in a flash of light. "Keep this with you in case there's monsters on the prowl." Khunbish took it, then jolted as Roland summoned his gun. "For self-defense, don't worry." "Gotcha, sir."

Two soreaways and thankfully no monsters later, Khunbish jogged back into view. "Aye, soldiers set up camp there." Roland tried moving his leg- it was better, but it still sent a trill of pain up and down his calf. Didn't seem like he'd be charging through soldiers at full speed like this. "Drat."
Roland muttered, grimacing.

But if… Roland summoned the small bag that held the ribbitydrops and turned it over on his left hand. Three hit his palm. Aha.

He turned to look at Khunbish, who held a dreading expression.

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“There’s got t’ be a better way, Roland, sir!” Khunbish insisted as they hopped through the camp. A mousefolk guard stomped past them, unaware of the creatures in the grass. “Oh yeah? What better way?” “Like, uh- I’ve had enough o’ bein’ a frog for a lifetime!” “That doesn’t sound like a good plan.” “Well, er, I understand yer situation, but this? Ain’t look good at all, sir.”

Unfortunately, Khunbish did have a point- the grass petered out, and soon there were two frogs bouncing along dry land, followed by a faint light.

“Hey, do you see that?” A voice said, and stomps along the ground alerted the two. One of the rat guards had noticed them. A burst of static from the other end of the telepathy. “Those are frogs, Luco.” A second voice had joined in the conversation. He could sense a bit of panic. Were the mouse guards going to capture them? “Oh blazes, oh no.” Gah, he didn’t mean for Khunbish to hear that. “Don’t look up. Keep going.”

A third voice. “What’s that floating above them?” A moment of silence, then a giggling laugh from above the frogs. “Stay back, Luco. Ghosts.” “That’s not a…” The Higgledie cackled, and there was stuttering steps behind them.

One more hop forward, and suddenly Roland felt a slight whoosh- a feeling of something being available once again. The trapdoor spell, he guessed... But can they do it as frogs? “Hold up, Khunbish.” “The frogs are haunted too, aren’t they?” To the mouse guards, the two frogs stopped right after the haunted comment. “Can you use the teleport spell?” “A-aye, I’ll try…”

A caw from above them- then the flapping of wings. “Oh blazes, not the carrion crows, I don’t wanna get eaten-” The green frog with the red beret disappeared in a flash of blue light. A scared yelp from behind Roland. So it does work, Roland thought. Alright.

Roland never imagined ghost frogs to be a thing, but as the blue glow enveloped him(and he heard a scream from further away), he realized he was making it a reality.

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The throne room of Evermore greeted his view. It was quiet- it was still early morning, after all, the sky beyond the castle entrance lighting a faint periwinkle. Roland looked up- the Eyes were gone. He closed his eyes in relief. Sunshine didn’t seem to have followed, though...

“Nothin’ out o’ the ordinary, missy.” Chingis’ voice from outside the castle made him jolt. Missy? Then- “Although I just heard from the lads that a frog with a red beret just appeared in the lounge.” “A red beret? Hm.” Tani. “I hope Khunbish’s…”

The two pirates stepped into the throne room to see a strange blue frog on the ground. They glanced between each other and Roland. “...doesn’t that look like Roland?” Tani asked. “Aye, miss, it’s the spiffin’ image o’ him.” “Hmm... it’s even got the big ol’ eyebrows.” Tani smiled and stepped closer, stooping as though trying stealth. “I bet Evan would appreciate-”

That was all it took for Roland to turn tail and hop further into the castle. “Oi! Get back here!” Tani
yelled, already closing the distance. Chingis hadn't followed, judging from the footsteps, but- Oh
gods, he didn't want to- Pressure closed around his sides, and the floorboards flew down- far too
down. He flailed, words only coming out as helpless croaks. “Gotcha, ye pesky thing.” “What’s
going on, Tani? Is there an intruder?” Leander. The Junior Consul half-ran around the corner of the
corridor and hurried towards Tani, only to slow down once he met the eyes of Roland, a captive
frog, still flailing his limbs. *Help me*, Roland thought. Him suddenly appearing in Evan’s room
would only scare the poor boy.

A *mildly* amused expression formed on Leander’s face. “You... might want to put Roland down,
Tani.” Tani laughed. “You think it looks like Roland too, right?” “No, I mean to say that this *is*
Roland.” A moment of silence. Roland stopped flailing.

...ah.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 77! No, it's definitely a coincidence that Act 7 more or
less ends on Chapter 77 lol. In any case, I guess I ended up focusing more on what
happened before the big ruckus in Ding Dong Dong happened. Hope it's satisfactory
haha. I also gave Khunbish a different reason for ending up in the dungeons because it'd
be illogical to send someone after a person's who's on counter-spy missions.

Anyway, a named OC from Chapter 2 makes an appearance again, being on border
control this time. We'll probably see more of him. Dellian security... isn't the best, I
guess?

We'll do a wrap-up on Act 7, and then it's going to be Act 8 hell. Sit tight!
Fortunately, Leander was able to dismiss the enchantment, so Roland didn’t have to wait an hour or so to stop being a frog. Unfortunately, it also meant that instead of being a frog, Roland was now a sooty man with a charred coat and a burn on his leg, and both the Junior Consul and the Minister of the Air Forces were quick to notice.

So with some help, Roland was back in his own room, watching as Leander continued applying healing magic to his bad leg. “You said you had taken soreaways for it, yes?” “Something like… at least five.” Leander hummed. “No wonder. I had wondered why the burn looked less serious than it should, considering the fabric sticking to it. A wise decision.” Roland chuckled. “It was stuffing leaves in my mouth or getting caught. Barely wise.”

The green glow faded away from Leander’s hands, and the Junior Consul checked Roland’s calf before nodding. “Both the spy and the associated Prying Eyes have been disposed of, with help from Batu and his men. Bracken is already arranging the import of security bots, which should arrive within a few days.” “That’s… impressively quick.” “We only have your signal to thank.” “Hey, take a little credit. If you hadn’t synchronized the glasses, the spy would’ve been alerted.”

A knock on the door, and the two Consuls looked up from the bed they were sitting on, Roland then hurrying to the door. Tani held a struggling green frog with a red beret on its head as she entered. A minute later, a now-human Khumbish ran out, yelling that he would never bully frogs in his lifetime. Tani- and Toby, Roland noticed- hurried after the poor man. With the only company being Leander and reminded of what also unfortunately happened, Roland closed the door, sat back on his bed and sunk his face into his hands.

“Why did you let Tani- no, why did you post that on Leafbook?” Roland groaned. “It was an attempt to get Tani to cease pestering me on the topic of frog-changing magic.” A pause, then a cough from Leander. “Hopefully. I made sure to say that it was not you in person, and that such magics are ancient and hard to replicate.” Roland dropped his hands and stared at Leander, mimicking Batu’s accent. “Ye still a damned traitor, Leander. A damned traitor.” The Junior Consul smiled. “Heh. That I am.”

---

When Roland stepped into the throne room later in the morning to formally announce his homecoming (with the coat now slightly less sooty), he was promptly clocked on the head by a wooden staff. “What yae doin’ here, ye traitoring thief?” Niall yelled. Batu held back the greenling while Evan stood up, smiling. “Roland!”

Roland rubbed the back of his head before walking forward. “Hey, Evan.” He couldn’t help but chuckle at Evan’s beaming smile. “I’m sorry for earlier- it must’ve been plenty confusing.” He raised the pendant in his hand. “Hope this makes it all worthwhile.”

Evan’s eyes lit up. “The Mark!” The young king took the pendant, holding it before smiling again. “What in the flippin’ shrubs, Yae Majesty?!” Niall yelled again. “He’s a hostile!”
The young king smiled. “If he was, then, well… I’d be disappointed by that clumsy, ineffective failure of a spy.” Maybe Evan didn’t need to word it that way…? “But he’d never betray us. Not after, well, everything.” Evan nodded at Roland. “You still owe us an explanation, though.” Roland blinked. “I thought you figured it out.” “I’d like to hear it from you. The full details.”

Ah, yeah. Roland cleared his throat. “Hm…” Now that he was thinking about how to narrate the entire thing, he felt both embarrassed and humbled. “It… Leander was the one to find out first. He found that there were spying devices fitted in the castle- prying eyes, like the one in Hydropolis but smaller. He deduced that they came from Ding Dong Dell. After discussing about it and hearing about the Mark of Kings, I thought that with my ambiguous background and position in Evermore, perhaps I could make myself suspicious to the spy, get taken to Ding Dong Dell, and find the Mark.” Heat was creeping up his neck. “It was impulsive, now that I think of it… but with Leander’s help, we put together an act. The cloaked figure that I was passing stolen papers to was really our Junior Consul.”

Leander nodded and walked over to hand Niall the two reports, and the greenling stared between the papers and them. “And, well, Batu and Tani realised quickly who the culprit was, and what I was trying to do. His punch was…” Roland turned to Batu for confirmation. “It was intentional?” “Aye, lad. Ye wanted to sow discord by gettin’ found out by the sky pirates, so ye got it. Lucky I got to hear about it first, though- if the more headstrong boys got word before me, they would’ve trussed ye up and thrown ye off a cliff the first chance they get.” Roland shuddered. “I hear you.”

Back to the narration. “With the punch being the final evidence of my ‘treason’, I cast myself out, and by then Evan had figured it out as well. Evan provided me with the hint to find where the Mark is- with the spy buying into the performance and the tools Leander provided me with…” He wasn’t about to take credit. “Here I am.”

The initial flush of heat had blurred into a blossoming warmth in Roland’s chest. “I was only there to take the Mark. Everything else… it was all thanks to all of you.” Leander coughed. “I’d like to elaborate that I cannot claim the honor of providing the items. The production of the knockout bullet system-” He nodded at Bracken. “Miss Meadows was the one to come up with the idea.”

Bracken unfolded her arms, eyes widening. “I had a feeling why you were being so specific about what you wanted the bullets to do! Hey, I missed out on so much!” “I apologise, Miss Meadows. I wanted to keep as many people in the dark as I could.” “I was kidding- of course you couldn’t risk letting the spy know. I’m happy I was able to put in a bit of my work.”

There was a question tugging at Roland’s mind, and he turned to Batu again. “How did you figure out I was faking treason?” Batu scratched at his head. “Well, ye’d know best that Niall’s reports are pretty useless t’ anyone most months. Every time half the report was ‘bout the casino. If ye were serious, ye’d have plenty others t’ get yer hands on.” Niall faked spitting at him. “And like Evan said, there’s no way ye’de betrayin’ us.” A pause, then Batu peered closer. “Ye alright?”

Roland noticed that his eyes were wet. He rubbed at them, smiling. “I’m fine. It’s just…” That he hadn’t slept much in the last five days. That he was able to do something. That while he knew his acting was terrible, they still figured it out within days. That they trusted him enough to let him go through with his plan. That they actually helped him with it, that despite everything, they trusted him.

It took a while, but if he wanted to be able to say goodbye on his own terms… this was his first step.

He grinned, composing himself. “I’m just glad that it went well.”
Once again, heartwarming bits aren't my forte.

Thank you for reading Chapter 78! Really, I think I made Act 7 the breather arc in this lmao.

We'll have a quick infodump next chapter regarding the diary: I admit it'd be a bit shoehorned in but the timeline's really stuffed from Act 8 onwards, so I kinda have to make do oof.
Roland was quickly excused from the meeting when Batu brought up the fact that he probably hadn’t slept a wink in hostile territory. He was grateful for it- already his head felt like a buzzing mush of mess- muttering a word of thanks to the Cloud Snake before leaving. The moment his face hit the mattresses in his room, he was gone until the sun fully lit up the room.

After waking up, he went and looked for Persha to help him fix his still sooty coat(“What is with you and getting your clothes torched?”). By the time Roland got his coat back, the sun was beginning to set. Once he had returned to his room, he sat down at the table, noticing Toby lounging on the shelves. It felt almost like whiplash to be suddenly without anything to do.

The diary. Hadn’t he made a mental note about it? The slate grey book appeared on the table, and he flipped it open. Two pages, four entries. The writing seemed to have become messier compared to the previous entries.

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Entry 20918

_The ministers have, despite my warnings, suggested that my king step down from his throne and let them handle it, yet again. No one has done this before my current king inherited the throne. It is my king’s age that made them think he was vulnerable- no king had taken up his mantle as young as he is. I had drawn Noumenia and demanded that they never speak of this subject- this, at least, shut them up._

_It makes my heart hurt to see my king so sullen- at such a young age, too. He has been questioning whether his being king was wrong. I have tried to convince him that it would never be the case, but he seemed unconvinced. I have to do something to remedy this situation. I must. Perhaps I will find some excuse to dismiss them, one by one. An underhanded plan, but hopefully an effective one._

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Entry 20919

_The council seems to have decided to turn their fangs on me as well- possibly because the Minister of Finance had left their ranks a day earlier on reason of report discrepancies. They have begun to demand, publicly or privately that I ‘not dominate the king’s duties any longer’, since I should only be standing guard over the kingdom. My patience wears thin, to be frank: why have they not said so when I acted as consul for the previous king and relieved them of theirs? I am sure they only crave for the seat of king, and I will not let them have their way._

_Unfortunately, with them spreading word of such context, dismissing them has become an unavailable option: attempting to continue will only be damning evidence for them to manipulate. Who knows what would happen if word spreads? I cannot risk shaking my nation to the core. I must think of a different way to keep them under control, but I can only hope to find direction soon..._
I believe that I have come up with a plan—one that dabbles with the unknown, but a plan nonetheless. If the council’s point of complaint is on whether I should take duties off my king as I am now, then I believe my actions should silence them. This should serve to keep them in line until they are of age to be dismissed. Only some more years before that happens.

I trust that in the long years that we have spent managing our kingdom, the great power has been tamed. After all, it has been under control for a long time, and it is more important that my king can grow to become a leader that can be proud of himself. That... finds joy, in the very least.

I can hear knocking outside again. Here to quarrel with me, I bet.

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Entry 20921

I must make the decision soon. There was an attempt to lock me in my room when the daily meetings began. Of course, this had no effect, although the ruckus from breaking out must have startled the people in charge of cleaning. (Note: I must recompense them for their troubles.) I have entered the meeting hall only to see the ministers screeching at my king, who had covered his ears in vain. I was able to stop them.

I have managed to put my king to bed, but I can still hear him crying. Perhaps he is asleep, perhaps he is not. I do not know any longer whether I can provide adequate comfort: with the progression of the court’s machinations, he has grown distant, slipped from my grasp. The fault lies with me.

---

Roland closed it, blinking and running a hand through his hair. Alright. He could assume that the writer meant the nation’s Kingmaker when referring to ‘the great power’; but…

A knock on the door. He went to open it, and in the doorway stood Evan. “Oh, Evan. Good afternoon.” Evan looked deep in thought. Roland frowned, asking, “Is there anything I can help you with, Evan?”

“Can you tell me about Ding Dong Dell’s defenses?” Evan looked up, then likely noticing Roland’s confused expression. “After you left the meeting, we talked about Mausinger, and I realised I’d never thought about how its people are faring under his rule. Now that we have the Mark, I want to go into Ding Dong Dell before we ask them to sign the Declaration. I want to ask them what they think and feel. Maybe that’ll help me… understand why my father was murdered.”

Oh. “And since Ding Dong Dell is heavily guarded, you’d like to find a point and sneak in from there.” Evan nodded, and Roland searched his memory before answering. “If I remember correctly, it seems to concentrate in the south… I’ll work on a map about that.” Evan smiled. “Thank you.”

The smile didn’t hide that Evan looked hesitant before turning away. Roland wished he could say more as Evan headed down the corridor, but at the same time... he wasn't one to have the full picture. He returned to his desk to begin his work- and to assess the situation.

Now that they had the Mark, it was inevitable that Mausinger would try to negotiate with Evermore for it. But the Mark of Kings, as Evan said, was proof of the right to rule— if they were to hand it over, meant that the usurper’s place as the king of Ding Dong Dell was being recognised. That the coup was being waved over— that the fact that Evan’s throne, home and family was taken— stolen from him in one fell swoop was being put behind them.
Was Evan ready for that?

And then there was the fact that the corruption presented on Vermine, not Mausinger. If Roland were to think optimistic, then perhaps Mausinger was not directly affected by Naverre’s corruption. On the flip side, it could mean Roland simply hadn’t nudged it to the surface, and that both of the mousekind was affected. Or… the coup was of Mausinger’s free will. A tremor went down his back.

Pen scratched on paper- he could only wish that that wasn’t the case.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 79! As promised, a bit of an infodump before Act 8, but... Honestly writing for the diary gets me like. Oof.

Act 8 is pretty plot-tight, but I'll try to add a bit of things in there. Please look forward to it!
“Alright.” Roland said, taking out the map the evening a day later. “This is how we’re going to infiltrate Ding Dong Dell.”

They’d temporarily reclaimed the conference room- it was easier for everyone to see the map that way. (Niall was relocated to the guest suite where he snored away.) The map was a close-up of Ding Dong Dell’s territory, and he pointed at the red crosses. “These mean that the troops are particularly dense in these areas. As you can see, they concentrate near the rivers, so the boat is a no-go, but…”

“We’ve got the old girl.” Bracken answered. “The Zippelin’s quiet as a mouse even at full speed-it’s a good thing Zip put her in our care.” “Which is not to say that caution will be required.” Leander added. “We cannot risk being seen by the guards, so a roundabout flight will be required.” Batu scratched his head before pointing on the map. “This spot o’er here hugged tight by mountains, so they won’t see us land here.”

“Wait, there’s one more problem.” Tani raised her hand. “I know we’re counting on the guards to not expect us to show up right after the break-in, but Evan’s look is pretty distinct, and Roland’s probably got his face all over the wanted posters. How do we go about that?” The six stared between each other, then at Evan and Roland. “Well, er…” Evan spoke up. “I have a coat of sorts.”

As Roland found himself being stared at, he was only aware after… what? Some months that he did have a rather limited wardrobe of turtlenecks, trousers and, well, the one guardsman’s coat he was wearing. He raised his hands in defeat. “There’s nothing from me.”

Batu dropped his fist into his other hand. “Well, there’s something that’d fit ye, definitely.”

“I had my doubts, but… it fits, indeed.”

Roland shuffled around in the robe Leander provided him with- the same black one used during their performance a week ago. Toby circled around them, giggling. “We have similar builds, after all. It’s a tad shorter on me, so thankfully I don’t have to worry about tripping on it any time soon.” He pulled the indigo scarf up so it covered his face from the nose down. “Can you see me like this?”

Leander shook his head. “Only your eyes.”

Roland pushed down the cloth, nodding. “Hopefully this looks Dellian enough to not look shady.” As for Evan, the young king had swapped out his red cape for a brown hooded coat that reached down to his knees- with the Leafbook posts, his cape was signature enough to immediately catch attention. The hood covered his ears, and as the Zippelin glided near soundlessly through the night sky, he tried to keep his tail underneath the coat, with Tani helping to check how it would be best hidden. Even though the cabin was lit with lamps, they had taken such a roundabout route that no one would see a star cross the sky horizontally.

“We’ll be landing in half an hour.” Bracken called from the steer. Next to her, an engineer- Marly, as the First Lady of Tech had introduced- held a tablet, watching and noting down the various controls and measures.

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They left the airship in Marly’s hands and in the camouflage of the trees and mountains, made their way to Ding Dong Dell just as dawn broke. Thankfully, there weren’t any changes in troop concentration from what Roland last remembered; the fields north of Ding Dong Dell’s walls were close to deserted, apart from the occasional monsters.

It wasn’t until they were actually getting close to Ding Dong Dell when Roland realised he’d never knew what the place looked like outside of the castle- both times he’d escaped through some sort of underground waterway, in the dark. Huge trees and vegetation wrapped around the fort walls- even then, blue roofs could be seen through the branches. Evan led them to what must be the eastern walls and pointed to a small door with a paw-like mark on it. “That’s where we put the Mark of Kings,” He brushed a few strands of ivy off the door and placed the pendant on it. A gentle green glow from the door, then a click. When the glow faded, the door was gone, a waterway in its place.

“Tidy!” Lofty cheered. “Kingsway, here we come!”

Once they had stepped out of the waterway, up the stairs on the side, Tani ran to an overarching bridge, raising her hands to her forehead. “So this is Ding Dong Dell, huh.” Bracken joined Tani and looked over the railings. “Looks right out of a picture book!” The place did look idyllic- brick lines of houses with brightly colored roofs, moss and plants growing in cracks on the walls… and then Roland could see a statue of a mouse peeking over a building in the distance. So the renovations weren’t limited to the castle interiors.

“How.” Leander pushed up his glasses as he observed a mousefolk walk by them drowsily- they probably were in a more remote corner of the nation. “The town seems peaceful…” “They started moving along the street, and it didn’t take long to figure it out.

“One cannot help but notice a distinct lack of grimalkin.” The Junior Consul concluded as they stared down at a fountain with a statue of Mausinger in the middle. “They’ve all jumped ship ‘nd set sail for safer shores, I shouldn’t wonder.” Batu replied, but- “But we haven’t seen much grimalkin in any of the nations we’ve been to…” Evan muttered, and Roland nodded. “That’s because Mausinger’s been keeping the grimalkin under close scrutiny since the coup happened. They either escaped or they didn’t.” The problem is where, he thought. “While I haven’t been let in on where the grimalkin are being kept, I think we can assume they were moved to an underground slum, or something similar.”

“If there aren’t grimalkin to speak with, I suppose we can still talk to the mice and the rats…” Evan frowned. “But I think we should split up. Us talking to them as a group as large as this… feels like interrogation.” “Good point.” Bracken agreed, “And a group of six with two robed guys and widely differing styles of clothes look pretty suspicious, if you ask me.”

“Which means me and pops are a team, right?” Tani asked. The Minister of Ingenuity nodded as the pirate girl continued, “And then... Leander and Evan could be a group. You look like you’d be related.”

Leander and Evan glanced at each other, the latter then grinning and trotting over. “That leaves us two, then.” Roland commented, nodding at Bracken. “In that case, we better get moving before the guards start noticing us,”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 80! Hey, we're at 80 chapters now heck yeah and thank
you for 90 kudos!

Honestly this section of Ding Dong Dell has me like. All six look different and then there's two hooded guys there's no way... they're not looking at least a tad bit suspicious sdfsfdf and no one actually called them out on it

Also, yes, Roland's borrowing clothes for a bit. Feels like a waste that they're just putting that spiffy robe aside after Act 7 and never picking it up again lol
Reconnaissance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It didn’t take much asking for the two to be able to distill a consensus out of the mousekind: since the grimalkin had been less than accepting of them in the past, they welcomed Mausinger’s takeover. “Payback, basically.” Roland repeated, as he and Bracken walked down the street.

“Payback.” Bracken agreed. “But… wow. Being oppressed for generations… I’m not sure if I want to blame them for taking revenge against grimalkin.” “I’d agree if there wasn’t world peace to consider.” After all, it was hypocritical of Roland to disagree. “This is a nation built on distrust- even with King Leonhard’s efforts, I doubt if they convinced much of the mousefolk. If we’re going to get them to join the union, it’ll take a lot of careful handling.” “You sound like you know a lot on the matter.” Roland tried pulling down the hood as he answered. “I kind of do, yeah.”

They watched as a guard ran down the street. While Roland was sure Evan was in good hands, he couldn’t help but worry how the young king was faring, hearing his former people laud praises to the one who killed his father. “And then there’s our king- there’s Evan to consider. This is probably the first time he’s hearing about how the mousekind’s been suffering under-”

“Hurry it up! We have to round up the grimalkin: they’re a threat to themselves and others!” A guard yelled from behind them, then a mouse guard ran up to them- the other ran past them. “Excuse me, have you seen a black-patterned, or a grey-furred grimalkin?” Roland was relieved there was no talk of a half-grimalkin. A pause, then the guard stepped closer. “You are… humanfolk.” “Yeah, we’re from Broadleaf.” Bracken waved in greeting before continuing, “Thought we’d want to try promoting our wares around here.” “Hm.” The guard glanced at Roland. “I suppose you haven’t heard of our travel ban?” “Early bird gets the worm. Worth a shot to make our brand known first.” Roland muttered lowly, hand slipping inside his sleeve.

Even with the helmet on, it wasn’t hard to guess that the guard was suspicious of his attire. “I’d like you to take your hood off, sir.” A pressure behind his brows, then a slap on his back. “Stop scratching!” Bracken declared, as though reprimanding. Roland hastily took his hand out of the sleeve. The engineer turned back to the guard. “He’s had a bad reaction to something here this morning. Probably the vegetation: pollen and whatnot, but he’s insisting on joining in on promotion, so this is all we can whip up in short notice.” “Oh.” The guard coughed. “That is… unfortunate.” “I know, right? He looks awful under that.” Bracken shrugged. “We won’t be staying too long, thankfully-”

“Luco!” The second guard from before had stuck her head around the corner of the street. “Whiskers, when are you ever going to learn to concentrate on your task? We’ve got a grimalkin to catch, not humanfolk!” Hadn’t Roland heard that name before? Luco turned and ran off, calling out an apology.

As the guard hurried off, Bracken sighed. “You weren’t actually going to shoot the guy, were you?” “I was thinking of using something to distract the guy while we run.” Roland adjusted the scarf covering his face. “I’ll find a way to return the favor…” Huh. “Didn’t they say they were tracking down a Grimalkin?” He asked, and Bracken nodded. “If you’re thinking what I’m thinking, let’s go.”

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They trailed after Luco and the other guard into a remote corner of the city, where shrubs grew on crumbling buildings. Bracken and Roland climbed up the ledge to avoid being seen while the guards hurried down a one-way route, then stopping at the edge of a waterway. Bracken put on her engineer’s goggles and together, they watched from behind a half-collapsed wall.

“The sign over there- it says monster infestation.” She muttered, then turned a part of the goggles. “Is that… a Higgledie?”

One of the guards had already turned around to leave, but as Roland squinted, he could indeed see a speck of yellow floating out from inside the entrance of the sewer. The guard that hadn’t left turned around, stood for a while, then ran inside the sewer. “The guard can see them?” Bracken asked. “Seems like it…” Suddenly, Roland felt a hand on his shoulder, and the two spun around, guns manifesting in their hands– “Oh.” Bracken’s pistol fizzled away. “Tani?”

“Aye! Guess we all caught on the same trail.” Tani pointed further down the ledge, where Batu waved from behind a wildly grown hedge. “We’re going after the guard, so go get Evan and Leander and catch up with us, yeah?” With a murmur of agreement as response, the two sky pirates– Roland was sure they were there before he and Bracken arrived, but how did he not notice at all?- got up and hurried along the ledge, finding a spot to jump down from. Roland and Bracken watched as the father-daughter duo ran into the entrance, then hurried back to the more populated parts of Ding Dong Dell.

“You weren’t actually going to shoot whoever was there, were you?” Roland decided to ask, smirking, on their way back, and Bracken shrugged in reply, grinning.

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They found Leander and Evan staring at the Mausinger statue from above. Evan lifted his head as they walked closer.

“I never once thought about their feelings.” The young king mumbled. “To think I called myself their king…” “You ought to remember you have not been on the Dellian throne for long- the coup occurred even before you were formally recognised as the king of Ding Dong Dell.” Leander answered, always the reliable, rational voice. “That, and you have now chosen to learn of the mousekind’s strife.” The Junior Consul then noticed Roland and Bracken’s arrival and turned around.

“We were able to find a grimalkin. We learnt that they are being kept in underground slums situated within the sewers, with soldiers posted at its entrance to keep them there.” Leander grimaced as he continued, “Even if one could simply be looking to buy food… If we are to consult the grimalkin, we will need to find a way in that isn’t guarded.”

“I think we found that way in.” Bracken answered. “Batu and Tani’s gone on ahead to investigate.” “It seems like they’re leaving that entrance untended for some reason.” Roland added, remembering how the other guard had immediately abandoned the chase. “So we’ve got a good chance that it’s what we’re looking for.”

“Then we should hurry!” Evan was understandably restless. “Lead the way, please.”

Chapter End Notes
Luco voluntarily resigned from border patrol duty a few days after Sunshine joined because he's pretty much the only one who can see the Higgledie and everyone thinks he's haunted by a ghost, and he doesn't want to keep spooking them, haha.

Thank you for reading Chapter 81! So let's do a quick recap of what the three sub-teams did: Leander and Evan asked around a bit, then got themselves into sandwich delivery and found Shadow, who later escaped into the sewers from a different route than the Old Well; Batu and Tani decided to get right to watching the guards patrol by sneaking around and found the old well; whereas Roland and Bracken also asked around and found the old well after Batu and Tani did.

Which means next chapter will be about the Old Well, and uh, let's just say I'm going to nerf the Imp Queen a little bit for the sake of word counts.
The slums

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sign wasn’t lying about monster infestations- the sewers were crawling with purple goos, skeleplasms and the like. “I wonder if Batu and Tani are alright…” Evan commented, keeping the sleeve of his coat against his nose as monster dust melted into the slowly moving waters. “They’ll be- they’re plenty strong.” Bracken answered, adjusting the pair of goggles on her head.

The stone ceiling had collapsed at places, letting in sunlight, so they could see without needing a light spell illuminating the way. The corridors soon led to a doorway; Lofty squinted at something and jumped. “Cor, there’s a statue o’er there.” As they stepped into the room, there was a statue of a rather pudgy cat with a crown and robes. Three smaller stone constructs framed the front of it. “That should be a statue of my ancestor…” Evan commented. “The smaller pillars… should be braziers, shouldn’t they?” Braziers… Roland frowned as he peered into them. “There’s still a bit of smoke.” He remembered that Batu and Tani had a Fire Higgledie companion. “Does that mean we’re supposed to light them up?”

Pyrite popped into view at those words. Leander marched around the statue, then calling out from behind it. “There seems to be a door behind the statue. It should be-” A blast of fire, and all three braziers lit immediately. A creaking noise, and Leander coughed and poked his head out from behind the statue. “The door is open.”

Roland couldn’t help but smirk as they headed through the now unlocked corridor. “I never figured your Higgledie partner’s a pyromaniac, Bracken.” A laugh from Bracken. “Hey, now. Pyrite formed when we first tried out the steam engines. When it comes to lighting things on fire, he’s a master.” Bracken watched as the Fire Higgledie danced around in the air. “I’m guessing there’s more of these in these sewers.”

It was a correct guess, but when Pyrite lit the last of the set of braziers in front of a second closed door- unlike the first, they were scattered along the sewers- the flame went out immediately. They tried it again in vain, then Evan noticed something and knelt. “Is that… a number here?”

The four gathered and looked at the base of the brazier. “Twenty-five…” Leander muttered. “Seconds?” Roland offered. “This sounds like a time-based mechanic.” “So we gotta go fast, huh.” A crack of the knuckles from Bracken- Pyrite mimicked her actions, a grin on the blobby face. “ Sounds like a challenge for you, Pyrite.”

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When they reached the third set of braziers, Evan frowned, then pulled off his hood, his ears straightening up. “What’s wrong?” Roland asked. The young king followed what must be the source of the sound. “Fighting.”

This time, a brick kept the barred door open- although with Pyrite flitting around the area at breakneck speeds, it swung open anyway. They hurried down the corridor to see Tani shoot arrows at a green imp while Batu swung his hammer at a larger, flower-headed one. To the side, a grimalkin in a grey dress, barely older than Evan would be, huddled against the wall, with a downed guard next to her. The yellow Higgledie- Sunshine, Roland recognised from the sunglasses- threw orbs of pure light, deterring a third, blue imp for brief intervals.
The group got to work. Leander raised his wand as he rushed in, purple whips of darkness forming at his command and lashing through the smaller imps. With Evan and Roland hurrying to intercept what must be the alpha of the monsters—“What took ye so long?” Batu yelled—Bracken had run to the guard, setting down a strange machine that whirred and released a shimmering green mist.

The flower-headed imp darted back and held up its hands, clapping—then another frustrated shout from Tani while Roland fired a Heavy Ammo at two newly spawned imps that more or less appeared from nowhere. “Not again—” Tani was cut off by Bracken yelling a warning, then the sound of rapid fire as two drones joined the fray.

The brawl didn’t last long, however— the sky pirate duo had vastly weakened the Imp Queen before they arrived, and with the six of them swarming it, it was quickly knocked out of its focus whenever sparks of elements gathered in its hands. Various blows from swords, hammers and lances, and the monster crumbled into dust, fading into the sunlight, its subordinate imps falling similarly. Once the fight concluded, the six turned their attention to the young grimalkin, who stood up. “Ah… thank you for saving my life! My name’s Moglet…” The grey-haired cat bowed, then looked, shock filling her eyes. “You’re… King Evan?!”

Evan quickly noticed that his hood was off, and fixed it. “Please don’t tell anyone.” “I… I promise I won’t. If you’re here, then it must mean that you’ll do something about Mausinger, right?” “I…”

A groan from near the wall, and Moglet jumped, running off immediately. “Wait!” Evan called out, but she had turned the corner. Leander and Bracken hurried to the guard. “He should be waking up soon— wounds’ almost completely healed.” Bracken said. A brief glow of light. “What was that you did?” “A memory spell.” Leander straightened up. “If he saw any of us, he wouldn’t remember.” “That’s pretty convenient.” “I’m obliged to agree.”

Obviously, they couldn’t stay, but there was the Light Higgledie to keep watch over the guard. Seeking refuge in that, they hurried to follow after Moglet— but the sewer quickly led into a small building. The smell of moss and dampness only got stronger here. A ruffle of movement: grimalkin stared at them from makeshift homes from cells, behind pieces of fabric hung on clotheslines, from the stone stairs that led upwards. Moglet saw them and called out that they were safe, and the grimalkin simply turned back to their work, one of the particularly burly ones marching outside.

“This is… the slums.” Evan mumbled. “It can’t be…” “They’ve crammed all t’ cat-folk into this little musty, damp place?” Batu growled. “This Ding Dong Dell’s rotten to the core, by t’ word!”

Moglet had jogged over, holding a small bag. “Thanks again for saving me. If this is any repayment…” She stuffed it into Evan’s hands. “Consider this a token of Moglet’s undying gratitude.” Evan returned the gift just as quickly. “I can’t possibly accept this. It’s reward enough to see you safe and sound. Plus, this is fish, right? It must be really hard to come by, with how things are…” “I—” “Please, take it.”

“Hard to come by? Definitely.” A second grimalkin, this time with black fur, had jumped down from the upper levels. Evan’s eyes widened. “Shadow!” Shadow smiled, albeit with a hint of bitterness in both expression and voice. “Fancy seeing you here again, buddy. But yes, even small reminders of home like these are a tough fix to get. The mice were… kind enough to sell tuna sandwiches, but fresh fish… it’d be braving a two-day journey to the river, monsters and patrolling guards included, catching fish and then doing the same on your return journey. And whatever freshness would’ve been gone from the fish by then.”

There was something familiar Roland could sense from Evan while the latter listened. Something like… a brewing thunderstorm. “Please, tell me more.” The young king spoke. Now that they found themselves having someone to vent their troubles to, the grimalkin slowly gathered at the base of the
Roland glanced at Batu, who scratched at the back of his head and frowned in response, then turned his attention back to the grimalkin, attempting to keep the sinking dread in check.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 82! Unfortunately, there isn't too much going on plot-wise at the moment, so please stick with me!

I'm theorizing here that there's also a time limit as to how long the braziers are going to be kept lit, so Moglet was the one to light them up the first time, and Luco was probably able to run through the doors while they were still open. Too bad they ran into the Imp of the Dawn soon afterwards, whatever the name was. The six basically stun-locked the imp.
As Moglet mentioned that her father had been arrested during their banishment from their homes, as a grimalkin woman joined in the conversation that they were often left defenseless from the monsters in the sewers (and a subdued mutter from Leander that they had nearly been under the threat from a strong one), as Shadow narrated his own run-in with the guards, where one of them had started staring at him when he was merely waiting in line to buy food, Evan’s face grew darker. Eventually, Batu asked for some space, and they headed up the stairs while the grimalkin remained in the base.

“It’s… a lot worse than I imagined.” Roland admitted. “And it’s all because we used to persecute mousekind…” Evan wasn’t aware that his tail was swinging wildly- it was only by the grimalkin’s respect of requests that no one saw it. “I’m… sure plenty of people are happy that Mausinger is in charge.” It wasn’t hard to see that he was gritting his teeth, either. “I- I don’t condone what he’s done, though… a leader must be above… petty vengeance.” Evan shook his head, concluding. “There’s no way we can form a union with such a kingdom.”

“But you must consider the grimalkin.” Leander pushed up his glasses. “If you do not take any action, these people- your people’s wellbeing and lives are at stake.” The young king’s face was set in a cold, hateful scowl as he stated, “You’re correct. Then we’ll take down Mausinger.” Leander looked alarmed at the sudden turn of events. “Your Majesty-” “He killed my father… and Nelly… He overthrew me… stole my kingdom… drove these poor people down here to suffer… He has to be removed.” Evan’s eyes gleamed. “Ding Dong Dell can never know peace otherwise!”

While understandable, it was not what Roland hoped to hear from Evan. He crossed his arms. “So that’s what you’re going to do, huh? Get some vengeance of your own?” The cold spark in Evan’s eyes wavered, and the young king looked up. “Huh?” “Yeah, makes sense. It’s always easier to stuff the mousefolk back in here and let the cats out. You’ve got plenty of evidence in Dellian history.” An uncomfortable silence hung over the group before Roland continued. “Tell me, Evan. Was your father a bad judge of character?”

“No!” Evan retorted. “He was- uh…” “Then why did he make someone like Mausinger his most trusted advisor?” “He… I guess-” Evan raised his hand to his chin, the cold fire extinguishing from his eyes. “Uh…”

A grimalkin- the one that had walked out of the slum previously- ran in. “A guard’s coming!” A hurried rush of activity- with Tani’s reminder, Evan’s tail snuck up into the folds of the coat again- Shadow waved from a nearby cell. “This way!” “What-” “We can’t let them see you.”

The six hurried in, and cloth was draped over the entrance. Voices from outside. “What are you doing here?” “Please, wait!” Roland recognised the voice. He pushed the cloth aside, just a crack, and peeked out at the plaza below. The edge of the stone floor blocked the majority of his view, but he could see them at the entrance. The mouse guard and the Higgledie- the former raising his hands up in a surrendering gesture. “My name is Luco- I, uh, I come with peaceful intent.”

A pause. “I’m looking for someone- someone… Ah.” Luco turned to his left. “There you are. Are you alright? Not hurt, hopefully?” “Hey, what’s going on? You trying to harass one of our folks here?” “No, I don’t mean to do that.” Another pause, then Luco’s voice could be heard. “I was… informed that there were strong monsters recently infesting the sewers. When I saw her escape into them, I thought I wanted to warn her, but… instead, I got attacked, and when I woke up…” A third
pause. “You managed to escape?”

Moglet’s voice. A cautious one. “I had help.” Luco looked around the place, then bowed. “Thank you very much.” It seemed like he thought the grimalkin were the ones to defeat the imp. “I was only assigned to patrol duty a few days ago… I’ll try my best not to overstep my boundaries.”

An unsettled silence drifted, then Luco coughed. “I shall take my leave.” For a split second, Roland thought the guard had looked up at them, but then Luco had left. “What was that about?” A grimalkin asked a few moments later. Shadow pulled aside the cloth, signalling that the coast was clear. “He… defended me from the monster.” Moglet said and pointed as the six returned to the base of the building. “And then they saved us.”

“Oh.” Murmurs among the crowd, then Evan spoke up, looking uncertain. “Is there a route back to the city that isn’t guarded but doesn’t go through the sewers?” “Yes, buddy.” Shadow said. “Do you want to leave?” “Well…” Evan looked at the floor. “Yes. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of much help.” “You’ve saved Moglet and beat whatever monster was there, so you did plenty of help. I’ll lead you out.”

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Once they were back above ground in Ding Dong Dell(having left through a different waterway and Shadow had retreated safely underground, Evan cleared his throat. “I’m sorry… but I need some time alone.” With that, he slowly walked off, leaving the five and Lofty, who sighed, staring at his retreating figure.

Roland immediately felt a shove on his shoulder. “D’ye have to set about the lad so mercilessly, ye devil ye? Can’t ye see it plays merry hell with his lil’ head?” On retrospect, he was indeed being rather insensitive, but… at least Evan seemed to be giving it thought. He trusted the young king to be able to come to his senses. “He’ll be okay. He’s a king.” Batu huffed. “Aye, well, there is that, I s’pose.”

“I don’t think it’s safe to stay here, though.” Bracken jolted her thumb at the hidden sewer entrance. “If the soldiers see us, they might get suspicious of this place.” “Then I shall look for Evan once we have found our spot.” Leander answered. “We have been travelling together as far as the Dellians are concerned.”

It was an unvoiced agreement, and the rest of the group set off.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 83! There's a few things that I changed or added that I'd like to address.

Roland's added dialogue is because honestly his comment on 'hey does your dad suck at judging character?' kind of isn't answering to Evan's vengeful perk, so I'm just going about that haha. Evan's initial going 'nah we're not gonna get DDD into the union' doesn't address the state the grimalkin are in, so there's also that. And then there's the fact the six just let the wanted king just wander off in and out of the sewer that's already said to be heavily guarded so there's that too.

Anyway next chapter there's the preparation for the big meeting and so on. Sit tight!
They had ended up standing around in the corner of a street, close to the Kingsway and still remote enough to avoid the guards’ surveillance. After some time—couldn’t be more than fifteen minutes—Leander came into view, Evan following close behind. The cold glint had fully disappeared from the latter, to Roland’s relief.

“And here they are.” Roland greeted the two. “You seem a little calmer, Evan.” “Yes, I think I am.” Evan answered. “Sorry about before.” Batu crossed his arms and huffed, although without any hostility. “Ye weren’t wrong, Roland: the lad soon came to his senses.” Evan frowned for a moment before clearing his throat. “Everyone—I’d like to… I must go to my father’s tomb. I need to read his diary. I need to understand him better.” A cough. “And we need to leave soon. I’ve been informed the soldiers here have been alerted to our presence.”

“Lead on, Evan.” Roland answered, and the young king nodded, a smile forming on his face.

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The group left Ding Dong Dell, and with Evan guiding their way, headed north-west to a route that led up a hill to a construct with a marble, cat-decorated crypt.

“This the Crypt of the Cat Kings, en’t it?” Lofty asked as they walked down the stairs. “I’ve heard o’ this place!” Evan nodded, stopping before a set of stone doors about a few times taller than they were. “Yes. And these doors… only the Mark of the Kings can open them.” With a quiet clack, the back of the Mark touched stone. A verdant glow spread from it into the patterns on the doors, then the doors swung open. “In we go.”

Black tombstones with gently glowing words lined a platform in the centre. On it was a white coffin and a white chest in its front, a crown adorning the former. As the six stepped onto the bottom of the stairs, torches lit up without sound. Evan muttered a short prayer— as did Leander— and opened the chest, carefully taking out a book from it. “This is… alright. This is my father’s diary.”

Evan opened it, turning to one of the latter pages. Fire crackled quietly. With his back turned to the five, it was impossible to see Evan’s expression. The words on the tombstones continued to glow. Then Evan turned around, closing the book. A pause, then Evan let out a breath.

“He trusted Mausinger.” He whispered, staring at the cover. “My father had complete faith in him.” The fire crackled, then Evan looked up, a new determination filling his eyes. “Then I have to make Mausinger see the truth. I have to tell him what my father really thought of him.”

“Mausinger’s still hankering for the Mark.” Roland stated. “The opportunity will present itself.” Evan nodded, the diary disappearing into light. “You’re right. Let’s go back to Evermore.”

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A week later, the opportunity presented itself. Chingis stormed into the castle that morning, waving a white sheet of something and yelling. The six looked up from a document that Leander was holding on the possibility of building a formal square and a cathedral for the Kingmaker. (“It’s high time for that, mun!” Lofty had said.)
“King Evan, sire! A letter! From Ding Dong Dell!” The six stood up at once while Chingis ran closer. The wax stamp on the back of the letter looked unique- “The sigil of Oakenhart…” Evan commented. “So from ol’ Mausinger himself.” Batu looked at Roland. “This yer plannin’?” “No.” It wasn’t. Roland watched as Chingis handed Evan a letter opener, noting the ‘To be delivered by hand’ on the cover of the letter. “But it was just a matter of time. Do you mind reading it, Evan?”

“Sure. Let’s see here…” Evan cleared his throat. “To His Radiant… Majesty… King Evan Pettiwhisker Tildrum of Evermore, tales of your great achievements continue to impress us.” A half-smile half-grimace crept onto his face, but it was quickly removed with another cough. “We would be honored if you would visit us to discuss your growing union. Our border guards have been instructed to grant you free passage… Simply present the Mark of Kings as proof of your identity. You eternal friend and servant, King Otto Mausinger of Ding Dong Dell.” He looked up. “And that’s it.”

Immediately, Batu spat on the floor, prompting a hasty “Pops!” from Tani. “Let me guess, he wants us to assume he wants to trade for the Mark of Kings.” Bracken commented. “But it’s really a trap.” “It is a trap, by all means.” Leander agreed, “We must approach this with utmost caution.” “I don’t think he’s even bothering to hide that fact.” Roland couldn’t help but sigh. “He knows we can’t refuse.” “So by his weasel words, tis’ no more than a challenge.” Batu ran his thumb along his nose. “‘nd a brazen one, by that!”

Evan stood up from his throne. “But it also means we can finally meet him face to face.” “So it’s off to Ding Dong Dell for the ol’ international negotiations, is it?” Lofty hopped as he continued. “Tidy! I’ll pack, uh, my negotiation shoes.”

Tani frowned at the Kingmaker. “Do you even wear shoes to begin with?” “That’s why I’m calling it negotiation shoes, lassie! Negotiations! Only!” If Lofty was trying to get the mood up, it was working. “We should get ready.” Evan concluded. “I propose we set off when the clock strikes noon.”

With nods, the meeting ended, but Lofty’s antics worked- to an extent. Roland caught up to Evan. “Evan-” The young king turned around as Roland slowed down and continued, “I think you know this, but there’s a good chance there’s going to be a fight ahead of us.” “I do.” Evan frowned, raising his hand to his chin. “He almost killed me once, after all- I doubt if he’ll just give up that easily. But I… if that ends up being the only thing that we can do… if fighting him can get him to listen to us, even for a short while- then I’ll…” Determination flared up in the king’s expression- one unlike the steely glint from before. “Then I’ll try.”

Roland nodded, feeling settled at the young king’s response. “Alright.” Then he’d better get ready too.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 84! I guess with the fic being not from Evan’s perspective, basically we can’t see what Leonhard wrote.

The bit about the square and such is honestly a quick jab at myself because I didn’t really look into actually building stuff until like. late act 8 lol I just went ham with research.
Negotiations

Chapter Notes

Just consider the waterpools adjacent to the throne room to be lower. You’ll see why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As according to the letter, the border guards allowed their passage, but as Evan and the others stepped into Ding Dong Dell, the Dellians that they passed by stared at them with apprehension—mousekind, humanfolk and even the few grimalkin guards that dotted the streets.

The path led up to the huge, blue-roofed castle, the gate to which was guarded by two more mouse guards. “Hold—” The one on the right peered at Evan. “Oh. It’s you, Ev—ahem. King Evan. Do you have the Mark?” Evan raised the green pendant that he had worn around his neck, and the two guards stepped aside. “His Majesty is waiting in the throne room. Do not make him wait.”

But as the main castle doors opened and they stepped into the Dellian castle, Leander paused, frowning. “Leander?” Evan asked. The six turned— their Higgledie companions wailed on something intangible until the doors closed. Oh no.

“There is a nixing spell in place within the castle.” Leander muttered once there weren’t any soldiers nearby. He reached his hand to his sleeve. “As I feared—while I can sense there is still some access to the arms band, I don’t seem to be able to summon my wand...” Roland tried to concentrate on a nearby vase—nothing. Not even a budge. “So they tryin’ to cheat?” Batu growled. “I’m not surprised, aye.” Evan held his chin to his fist. “Does that mean—”

“Your Majesty?” A voice spoke from inside the castle, and a mousefolk lady with a yellow dress hurried to them. “Ratja!” That must be the lady’s name— and Evan knew her. Not a hostile, hopefully. “Hello again, Evan.” Ratja bowed. “I see that you have found strength after our talk.” “Yes, thank you.” Evan lowered his voice. “Ratja, do you know anything about the nixing spell?” “Yes. Vermine had a mage set it up.” Ratja paused. “It seems like the generals can still use their weapons, but...”

“Hey! You six—don’t keep His Majesty waiting!” A shout from the guard at the gate, and Ratja stepped back. “Be careful, King Evan.” “I will.”

“...this is a problem if a fight is inevitable.” Leander said quietly as they continued towards the throne room, unease apparent on his face. "What did Miss Ratja mean by generals?" "The highest-ranked soldiers are granted arms bands." Evan answered. "Which... should be a relief..."

As with before, the staircases led upward, then they could see the entrance to the throne room. “My heart’s beating like.” Lofty hopped onwards in his blue shoes. “Real fast, mun.” Then the mouse-eared throne decorated with fish came into view. Mausinger smiled from the throne he sat on, Vermine on his left as usual.

“Your Majesty.” The usurper king stood up from his throne at Evan’s greeting. “It has been too long— and I see Mr. Crane is with you.” A chuckle. “I must thank you for exposing our susceptibility to infiltration so—”
“What’s with the nixing spell, hrm?” Batu cut in. Mausinger smiled. “Ah, do not fret: it is simply to appease my men about your arrival. After all, your friend here-” A glance at Roland, “-nearly brought down the castle we stand in only a few weeks ago.” An exaggeration, really- The ferret’s eyes narrowed. “Unless you do not come here with peaceful intent?”

“We come in peace- we have brought the Mark as you requested.” Evan answered, holding up the pendant. “King Mausinger, I have come to speak with you as the leader of one nation to another.” “Yes, yes.” Mausinger nodded. “I must commend you on your new realm… and your persistence. With your first attempt to rule failing so abjectly, you would be forgiven for not trying again.”

“I promised Nelly.” Evan stood tall. “That I would build a kingdom where everyone can live happily ever after.” A pause. Vermine glanced at Mausinger. “And you mean to do this with your pathetic little pact. Such naive idealism.”

Evan stepped forward. “It’s not! The Declaration-” Vermine pointed at Evan, cutting the latter off with a flourish. “Your Majesty, I insist you not humor the boy’s nonsense a moment longer! He does not mean to forge an alliance of equals- he means to bend our kind to his will, just as his father did!” Rattling of armor, and Roland glanced behind him to see that soldiers had gathered at the throne room entrance. Strangely, there were no mages… “Your motives are painfully transparent, Tildrum. But His Majesty will not countenance such foolishness.” Mausinger stood up as Vermine continued, “Those days are long gone.”

“There will be no pact.” Mausinger growled as he began down the stairs to where the six were standing. “Mousekind will bend to the will of the grimalkin no more.” A sword appeared in his hand in a flash- weapons were summoned and drawn as the two parties faced off for battle. Evan hadn’t brought out his sword, however- “King Mausinger, please: we have to stop this! I understand why you overthrew me! So much has happened between our two species, but we can’t let it go on! We have to make the cycle of hatred end!”

Fire wrapped around Mausinger’s sword, and he swung it, red plumes of flame spreading out. “What do you know about hatred, boy? Of the taste of shame? Of the humiliation of servitude?!” The squad of soldiers drew closer. “Enough of your talk. The line of Tildrums ends here. Today. At my hand.” His snarl turned into a smirk. “How long have I waited for this moment!”

And with a flash of light, Mausinger disappeared- the soldiers roared and charged in. “He can teleport?!” Leander shouted, raising his lance. “Be on your guard, Ev-”

A screech as metal hit metal- Evan parried the fiery sword and jumped aside. “We have to stop this! We didn’t come to fight you, Mausinger!” Mausinger snarled- Roland ducked as an axe swung over his head. As he smashed his sword against the soldier’s helmet, more roars of fire continued behind him. “Ding Dong Dell faces a better, brighter future without you!” Mausinger yelled. Tani kicked aside a soldier while Batu and Bracken swung their hammers against a stockier, general-looking mousefolk who blocked both.

It was clear that Mausinger was targeting Evan alone- while the young king was nimble enough to watch where the flames spread and avoid them, the same fiery attacks kept the others at bay, separating the battlefield into a duel near the throne and a brawl near the entrance. Roland jabbed the handle of his sword into a soldier’s stomach, and with an cry, the soldier toppled over the railing and into the waterpool below. It was shallow, but low enough to keep them from returning to the battlefield-

He turned to see that Leander had shoved the soldier Tani had fought earlier into the water with the side of his lance as well- the pirate girl had turned her sights to helping her father and Bracken overcome the general when Leander took over the duel. Bracken locked axes with her foe, then Tani
smacked her lance on the general’s shin. Evan locked blades with Mausinger, the latter snarling something that Roland couldn’t quite catch as he knocked a soldier aside- while Leander was unable to propel his lance with magic, he disarmed the soldier by hitting their arms with the wooden part of the pole. A grunt to their side- a metallic clank, then another sound of metal against metal as the general toppled over the rails into the water from two kicks, one of them sparking.

Bracken straightened up- a plume of fire deterred Batu from rushing to aid Evan, whose cape was starting to look rather singed. “Evan!” Tani yelled, raising her lance. A flash of light and the lance was swapped for a more streamlined one- she threw it at Mausinger, who glanced and teleported. The lance knocked over a metal construct near the throne- where the rat king soon appeared in front of.

"See?!" Vermine screeched, peering out from behind the metal chair. “They don’t come in peace- they intend to take your place as king away!” “Ye started it, ye gutter rat!” Batu yelled as the six regrouped. The soldiers outside the throne room got ready to rush in, but Mausinger snarled again. "Stand down! I shall handle this myself!"

The throne room doors swung shut without warning. “You shall burn, Tildrum, with your wretched bloodline!” Mausinger shouted, seething. Embers rose from where he stood.

Chapter End Notes

So... I ended up making the first half of the fight a brawl whoops

Thank you for reading Chapter 85! In short, the nixing spell pretty much locks up both ranged and magic-related skills except for Mausinger, but Tani just disregards it by flippin' javelinating her spear haha. You can probably guess who Vermine sought out. Also yes Bracken and Batu probably spartan-kicked that general.

Leander probably ain’t the best(read: terrible) at physical attacks but I guess he at least knows how to use them?? Hydropolitan soldiers specialise in lances after all so even if he uses them more like a pole it's still, usable Ifkjsfds

Next chapter will be another mundane solution to something so sit tight haha.
The flames around Mausinger’s sword glowed fiercely- Evan shook his head. “I have to make you see, Mausinger! We can still talk this through- please, you have to let this stop!” “Silence, fool! Are you so deluded to think I’d listen to you after all your kind has done?” Fire swirled around the rat king- a sheen spread upwards. “You will perish! And all cat-kind with you!” “You don’t know what you’re saying, Mausinger!’ Roland yelled. “Vermine’s putting words into your mouth!”

“Burn!” That was the only warning they had before fireballs formed from the red barrier and flung towards them in wide arcs. “What’s his problem?!?” Tani yelled over the roars of fire, ducking as a fireball flew over his head, then summoning a second lance and flinging it at Mausinger. It hit the barrier, stopped, then- burst into flames. “A barrier made of pure fire.” Leander grimaced and stumbled back as a second line of fire smashed onto the palace floor, lashing at his legs. “Maintaining magic with this magnitude will drain him fast-” “But we gotta not die before his magic runs out, by yur!” Lofty screeched, hopping around. “There’s no Higgledies to save our hides, even!”

Bracken hummed- after dodging a splash of flame, she paused. What was she doing? The fireballs could hit her location any moment! “Bracken?” Someone asked- Roland forgot who, as he yanked the Junior Consul back. “I’ve got it!” Once the fire cleared, he could see that Bracken had taken out two drones, throwing one to Leander and propelling herself backward as an orb of fire hurtled towards her spot. Leander’s eyes widened- in recognition of something.

Batu bashed his hammer at an incoming fireball- while it dispersed, he hissed. “What you told me about the drones-” Leander was saying- Evan ran forward, still shouting for Mausinger to stop- “Yes!” Bracken held an expression that screamed ‘Eureka!’. She pressed on the side of the drone. “Emergency order mu!” Leander did the same, and they threw the drones off the side of the rails- into the waterpool. “Don’t break them!” Bracken yelled in response to the confused shouting below the platform. A few moments later, the drones rose to the ceiling. The fireballs only seemed to increase in intensity- there were already a few pots of soreaway scattered on the ground- then suddenly a blast of something, and for a few moments, Roland couldn’t see.

Then he could feel weight dragging on his coat. A bead of water slid down his face. Bracken shook water out of her hair, as with a few others. Oh- the two drones hovered over Mausinger- already the red barrier was wavering- and released another blast of water. “A... firefighting function?” Roland found himself questioning. “Yep!” Bracken smiled victoriously as water trickled down the stairs, down from the sides of the platform they were on. “Seeks water, seeks heat, releases water. Plenty glad it worked here.”

Mausinger snarled, swinging his sword- not sopping wet, likely because of the barrier. Embers appeared on the sword in short bursts and faded away. “Bracken introduced Broadleaf technology during your absence.” Leander added, as the six gathered in the center of the corridor again- this time soaking wet. “Our Mark-stealing scheme started soon after, so I believe you weren’t in the know.” “Nice one.” Tani grinned at the Minister of Ingenuity. Then the rat king darted forward- the lack of fire as support hadn’t extinguished his thirst for revenge. Evan was quick to parry Mausinger. “Why?!?” Mausinger snarled. “Why won’t you die?!”

Batu growled, and with a swing of his hammer, the rat king was forced back. Mausinger had to stop fighting. “Sorry, Evan!” Roland shouted, then darted forward, sword drawn-
The edge of the blade glanced against Mausinger’s sword arm. With a shocked cry, Mausinger stumbled backwards, gripping his wound. “I cannot lose…” He managed, then grimaced. “Humiliated by two generations of the same accursed line! Damn you, Tildrum- and all your kind!” “We don’t have to do this, Mausinger.” Evan pleaded, sword disappearing in light. “I didn’t come here to fight you! I don’t want to fight you!” Mausinger gritted his teeth, a brief pause as though he was considering it-

“Come, Your Majesty!” Vermine had stepped out from where he had cowered behind the throne. A plume of purple aura rose from him- the same one that Roland had seen before. “You cannot simply bow to defeat! If you do not destroy these worms, our people will never be safe! They will never be free!” “Free?” Any signs of relenting disappeared from Mausinger. “Y-yes… we must be free!” It couldn’t be. Was Vermine- Mausinger glowered, rage renewed. “Every last grimalkin must die!” He pointed his sword to the sky, a glow forming around it. “Come, Oakenhart! Come to me!”

Everything afterwards happened in a blink. A flash of purple, a man with a snake headdress, a pained groan, and the glow in Mausinger’s sword blinked out. Naverre.

Roland acted on the sudden jump in his gut and rushed forward, swinging his sword down on the sorcerer, but Naverre stretched out his other hand at him- the sword clanged against a barrier of dark energy, unable to intercept its target. Naverre growled and the barrier expanded to knock Roland back. “Roland!” Evan yelped beside him as he skidded to a stop. “I’m fine!” Mausinger was their priority, after all-

The emerald-colored Kingsbond materialised as Mausinger stammered, “My Kingsbond... Who... who are you?!” Naverre did not respond, only yanking and ripping the Kingsbond from the mousefolk. Tendrils of light drifted down from the ceiling as the broken Kingsbond curled into an orb in Naverre’s hand. “I was hoping this would end.” The sorcerer muttered without any hint of gloating.

Vermine jogged down the stairs and bowed in front of the sorcerer, rubbing his hands. “At last it is done, master!” Mausinger collapsed to his knees and stared at his chancellor in horror. “Ver... Vermine?” The turncoat chancellor smirked, leering at Mausinger. “I hope you can forgive me, Your Majesty.” Vermine rubbed his hands as he continued, “Even I must confess feeling some... small pang of guilt at having encouraged to slay your dearest friend and patron.” A flare of purple aura. “But you should not have so readily taken my word over Leonhard’s. Those who claim that blood is thicker than water grossly overstate the case, my beloved fellow mouse.”

Naverre hadn’t spoken at all, but Vermine’s pride was so strong it brought the taste of bile. “In fact, your king was too nauseatingly good-natured to betray you. To contemplate anything so base as manipulating you into keeping our kind in check.” The stout mouse laughed. “And more fool him, as you are so very easy to manipulate!” “How could you, Vermine?” Shock had fully registered in Mausinger’s eyes. Vermine sniffed in disdainful reply. “How could I betray my master, you ask? Hmph! How foolish for you to ask that question!” The rat turned to Naverre. “Now, Lord Naverre- I have fulfilled my part of the bargain. My price was the kingdom, if you recall. I hereby claim it.”

“Yes, of course...” A tremor ran down Roland’s back as Naverre spoke- it was low and carefully controlled, but there was no mistaking it. Beneath the words were simple, seething rage. “You must be rewarded for your faithful services.”

The snake-headed sorcerer stretched out his hand, and from it, a wave of darkness rushed into Vermine- rushed through Vermine. A ghostly silhouette of the chancellor shifted into view, then dissipated. Vermine fell to his knees, swaying dreamily, mouth hanging open.

“Naverre, what have you done to him?” Roland asked, staring at the incapacitated chancellor. “I
have repaid the debt of a soulless traitor.” Naverre replied, turning to Mausinger. “I had nearly hoped that you would be able to resist this… this worm’s words. You and your king were both too pure-hearted, too noble of intention to corrupt directly - yet in the end, a creature as base as this was able to bring both of you down.” A twinge of wistfulness had crept into his words. “…such is our fate, isn’t it?”

Evan stepped forward, but Naverre paid him no attention. “No matter. My plan is complete. We shall be free - we shall be free.” There was no time to consider the sorcerer’s words, as he had warped away, never affected by the nixing spell. Mist seeped in from the cracks of the door, gathering before the throne. Mausinger turned around as the mist thickened, forming a shape.

“Oakenhart.” With Mausinger’s mutter, a green, deer-like creature stepped out from the white fog. Its eyes glowed red, then white wings spread, and with a gush of wind, it took to the air. Mausinger’s hand gripped on his sword, and he turned to Evan. “You must escape, King Evan.” The Dellian king stared at the realmwrecker. “If it has come to this, then I must-” “No.” Evan stepped forward. “You needn’t do this alone.”

The realmwrecker roared - the purple swirls covering view. “We’ll fight him together!” Evan declared as with a flap of its wings, Oakenhart called forth its realm.

Chapter End Notes

I gotta agree with Mausinger here. Getting your ace in the sleeve wrecked by something as mundane as dropping an fountain's worth of water on you is pretty humiliating whoops

Thank you for reading Chapter 86! Honestly I've never really understood the soaked status? It's a cool thing when it happens but what does it do.... Anyway that's four Kingsbonds stolen now and there's a realmwrecker fight right along the corner that I... need to level up my armies before tackling. In the game I mean haha. Sit tight!

Also! Thank you for 3000 hits! Here's to... well, more 0:!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oakenhart’s realm was an ethereal woodland- as the purple haze dissipated, Roland could see that not only the Evermore crew was present, Mausinger and the unlucky Dellian soldiers that had fallen over the rails were there as well- the general, upon seeing Mausinger’s state, hurried to bring out a sixth senser, among other healing items. Oakenhart landed gracefully, despite its berserk state. Hushed whispers from the soldiers- confusion on their whereabouts and the fact Oakenhart exuded hostility.

Almost by instinct, Roland raised his hand- to his relief, the sword he had been holding on to fizzled into light, replaced by his trusty pistol. A scoff next to him- “That’s more like it.” Leander commented quietly, blue light already gathering around his wand as he concentrated on a spell.

The realmwrecker reared, roared, and the moment a weak point appeared on its front right leg, the golden glow was overwhelmed- tinted by the magic that supported their attacks. “Alright, ye rats!” Batu shouted at the mousefolk soldiers, who squeaked in shock as Oakenhart screeched. “Yer Kingmaker’s gone haywire! Here’s what ye do- either try hitting the glowing spots or try not t’ die!” “Oi, mun, hol’up!” Lofty had yelled. “Look’ere!”

The tiny Kingmaker was pointing at a bud that burrowed up from the ground- more had cropped up around the battlefield, coughing green, glistening pollen into the air. “You-” Lofty was cut off by Evan releasing a barrage of magic orbs that homed in on the bud and a few others, blasting them. “Yeah, do that.” Lofty resigned, and sighed- Higmakers jumped up from where the strange vegetation wilted.

Oakenhart had recovered from the impact- it stomped on the ground, and soil crumbled as though something was snaking towards them. They knew better than to stay in that spot, and as the large group scattered, spiraling vines shot up from the ground where they were.

Better get the gig going. Roland fired off a few gravity-imbued bullets as he closed the distance and slashed at the weak spot- Batu was already wailing away at it. Fireballs hurtled above him at the realmwrecker. Moments later, Evan had joined in. “Beware of Oakenhart’s breath!” He heard Mausinger yell behind him, another barrage of fire followed by whips of darkness lashing into the creature’s face as it cried out. “The poison will strike you defenseless!”

The weak point broke, and losing its balance, the realmwrecker stumbled and fell, its head enveloped in golden light. Flurry of attacks struck until it broke, then Oakenhart took to the air. Purple mist enveloped it, and there was a shout: again, from Mausinger.

“The Kingmaker is mustering itself for a powerful attack! This way!” The three turned to see Mausinger holding up his sword, runes spiralling out with him in the center. A mousekind soldier cut apart a pollen-puffing plant before joining their fellow soldiers in hurrying towards the Dellian king, who continued, “I can protect you!” Evan nodded, and they retreated into the boundaries of the spell, as with the others. Flames shot up from the edges of the spell, forming a dome over their heads.

“This is…” Evan muttered quietly as they waited for Oakenhart to release its attack. Leander activated a sixth senser and set it on the ground, the mousefolk mage quickly following suit. A calming aroma drifted within the barrier. “I remember my father telling me about it. That you were adept in protection magic even before he met you…” Mausinger did not respond to Evan, only closing his eyes and concentrating.
Oakenhart landed on the ground. With a roar, purple vines broke through the ground, rising and crashing against the red barrier. For some time, it was all they could see. One of the sixth sensers emptied- it was swiftly replaced by another. Then another, until the crisscrossing, barbed lines of vegetation melted into purple mist and faded. Mausinger grunted, and the barrier disappeared. The weak spot was now on its left front foot, but Oakenhart now oozed the same purple mist that had formed its previous attack, spreading it with flaps of its wings. From what Mausinger had mentioned and the coloration, it was... mostly likely poisonous. The others seemed to have the same idea, opting to snipe the weak spot with various attacks from afar, but the mist was opaque, barely allowing the light from the weak point through.

Hey, what about the Higmakers? Roland looked around- there they were, in a group just off to the side. He ran over to them. “A little help?” One of them jumped, and floated into the air. The rest of the group followed suit, and they flew up, flying as though forming a hurricane- and wind picked up around him, whipping at his hair. The Higmaker-enhanced hurricane expanded outwards, past him, towards the others. The wind persisted, however. Almost like a barrier. Perhaps...

He ran towards Oakenhart, where the poisonous fog still lingered, obscuring view. Ground rumbled beneath him- he jumped aside to sense one of the spiraling vines grazing his coat, but just as he reached the edge of the purple gas, the swirl of wind dissipated it. So that’s how it worked.

With a few paces, the weak point was now before him, gleaming. He raised his sword, concentrated- the blade became wreathed in magic- and drove it downwards. Oakenhart screeched, stumbling- it collapsed onto the grass, the whoosh of air driving away the rest of the fog as it landed. While the realmwrecker struggled to get up, its head was enveloped in golden light once more; with the resulting barrage of strikes overwhelming the glow. The blue light spread from Oakenhart’s head to its body, then throughout the ground.

And then they were in the Dellian throne room once more, standing as a larger group. Vermine swayed where he kneeled, ignorant of the world around him. The soldiers that had assisted in the fight against Oakenhart quickly dragged the once-chancellor out of the room by his shoulders, shouting orders before the closing doors blocked out sound again. Fabric rustled- Mausinger collapsed on his knees on the carpet, staring at the throne.

“Ding Dong Dell is doomed.” Mausinger muttered. “I have doomed it. For my kingsbond to have been plucked from me… I was not fit to rule… I was weak.” The mousefolk’s shoulders sagged. “Take my life, Tildrum. It is your right. To avenge your father… to avenge your kingdom.”

“No, Mausinger.” Evan replied. “There will be no more needless death. And this kingdom is not doomed- it will rise again. And it will do so because its people will rebuild it: cat and mouse, hand in hand.” Mausinger turned his head towards Evan briefly, then looked down again. Leonhard’s diary appeared in Evan’s hands, and the young king offered it. “My father trusted you. You cannot fail him now.”

Chapter End Notes

Compare it with Longfang’s fight and honestly? The crew’s come a pretty long way.

Thank you for reading Chapter 87! Not much going on here except for Oakenhart’s fight and also Mausinger. Although I have to admit, I might take a quick hiatus because I’m having a bit of a block on how to get to Act 9, so please bear with me!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At first, Mausinger eyed the book with some confusion. “This is…?” “This is my father’s diary.” Evan explained. “I am in no position in speak for my father- but what he wrote will.” “You mean… for me to read it?” Evan nodded in answer, and walking before Mausinger, offered the book once more.

With some hesitation, Mausinger took it, and began to read. His eyes narrowed, then widened as he read it, slowly filling with tears. The flipping of the pages began to quicken, but at a controlled pace as Mausinger continued to read. When he reached the later pages, he raised one trembling hand to his forehead, keeping back a sob. “He… believed in me… I…” He raised his head, keeping the tears from dripping onto the diary. “And I… what have I done?!”

He wiped the tears away, seemingly resolving to finish reading the pages- although from the sliver of paper that Roland could see, there were only empty page after empty page. Mausinger turned to the last piece of paper- to the back of the book cover, then his hand paused.

“This is-” Fingers unlatched something from the brown cover. Mausinger held it up to reveal it was some sort of bookmark. “This is… the bookmark back when we- when we pledged to heal the rift between grimalkin and mousekind, one step at a time-”

The diary suddenly took on a green glow- as Evan moved aside, a gentle shimmer of light left the bookmark, growing as it reached the ground in front of Mausinger. A voice.

“It comforts me that we both remember this bookmark, Otto, my dearest friend.”

A form took shape- a grimalkin with a lion’s mane for a beard, wreathed in a ghostly glow, bearing royal garments and a crown on its head. “Your Majesty…” Mausinger uttered, then knelt on one knee. Evan spoke a soundless ‘Father’, but watched, calm.

King Leonhard smiled. “It was a gift to you when you first joined the ranks of Dellian ministers, was it not? The others had been so up in arms about a mere gift that you were practically forced to return it in private.” Mausinger nodded, then lowered his head and spoke, voice shaking, “That was… when we agreed on our ambition to bring grimalkin and mousefolk together…”

Mausinger looked up. “Y-your Majesty, I-” “I forgive you.” “What…?” Leonhard closed his eyes. “I must confess that when I first became aware of your actions, I felt anger at how you endangered my family- my son… but the truth stands. You were driven by doubt. Doubt in yourself, doubt in others- that feeded into each other, that you were drowning within it, even when I was king. It was in my pride that I did not see you falter. I imagined that I was already doing more than my fathers before me, and I blinded myself.” The ghost king turned aside, crossing his arms. “Thus, I have endangered everyone around me.”

King Leonhard looked at his old friend, whose tears were streaming once more. “But all has happened- all we can do now is to look forward.” A pause. “We both know that the rift between our two kinds cannot be healed so easily- that such a distance since time immemorial can only be closed, quoting ourselves, ‘one step at a time’. But the steps I have taken were minute, barely scratching the surface- we both bore witness to how little even making you chancellor changed everyone.” King Leonhard hummed. “But Mausinger- you will bring this about. Bring our two kinds together, so that
one day, we may stand together, hand in hand at last, all thoughts of oppression consigned to history.”

A shuddering gasp from Mausinger. “But why…? Why would you trust in one who had failed you so utterly? At whose hand… you…” King Leonhard’s smile grew warm. “I always trusted in you, old friend. And I always will. You see far- further than I ever could. You are a maker of plans- doer of deeds. A true ruler and a true king.” “King…” Mausinger’s eyes furrowed in both alarm and confusion. “You think me… worthy?” “Who better to rule over the realm I love than one who loves it just as fiercely? And…” He turned to Evan, who jolted at the sudden attention. A twinkle of pride crept into the ghost king’s eyes. “My son seeks the cooperation of Ding Dong Dell, do you not, Evan?” After a few blinks, Evan’s brows came together as he stood strong. “I do. We must all stand as one to face the threat of the Horned One.”

Father and son stood for a few seconds before King Leonhard closed his eyes again. “I am fully to blame for your strife, my son. Will you forgive me?” Evan smiled, then nodded. A genuine one. “Of course, father.” “Thank you…” An exhale, then a quiet expression of shock.

Glimmers of ethereal light escaped King Leonhard’s form. “Alas…” He whispered before looking at his son and former chancellor. “It seems… the time allowed to me is coming to a close. Mausinger…” “Yes, Your Majesty.” “I leave Ding Dong Dell in your hands. Do not fail me- become a true king. Watch over the land we both love so fervently.”

The dissipating king looked at Evan, who nodded again, calm. “Evan…” King Leonhard closed his eyes. “Remember that I have always been ever so proud of you. Of how far you’ve come, of how strong you’ve grown. Be well, my son.” The shimmering and rippling of the ghost grew stronger, and he stepped back. “I hope to hear tales of lands led by benevolent, kind kings from those who…”

The words the king was about to say were swallowed up by light- wisps of ghostly fire lingering weakly in the room before those blinked out as well. Mausinger continued kneeling on one knee, but he carefully put the bookmark back in the diary, closing it. Evan walked to in front of Mausinger, who closed his eyes. “You have come far, son of Leonhard.” The Dellian king spoke softly, standing up. “I will sign the treaty. It is what your father would have wanted, and so it shall be.” “Thank you, Your Majesty. Let us work together to make a better, more peaceful world.”

Mausinger gestured to return the diary to Evan, but the young king shook his head. “Please, keep it. There will be long, arduous times ahead.” The diary was held a few seconds more before dissipating into light. “You have come far, indeed…” Mausinger stood straight. “I will gladly stand beside you, and I will make Ding Dong Dell a nation where all races can stand beside one another. The enmity of generations will divide us no longer. I salute you, Evan, Lord of Evermore.”

The Dellian king cleared his throat. “However… before we formally swear our pact, may there be some time given? The grimalkin of Ding Dong Dell require reparations.” Evan nodded, “Of course. I’ll go with you- my presence may be of help.”

The two kings walked out of the throne room together.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that’s act 8 mostly wrapped up. It’s funny how the chapter numbers and the act kind of match 0:
Thank you for reading Chapter 88! Honestly, if King Leonhard hadn't noticed something off about his friend isn't it kind of his fault for not noticing? So I guess I went there haha. I admit I'm not exactly satisfied with how I went about this part of the game but ehhhh guess there's only a bit more to go. Probably late-game apprehension, so I'll drop the complaining soon enough, don't worry.
Acceptance

Chapter Notes

Boy oh boy wouldn't it be awkward if Naverre just revived the Horned One right away

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The mousefolk that witnessed the kings of Ding Dong Dell and Evermore stride out of the castle together were in confusion - whereas the grimalkin who watched Mausinger enter the sewers reacted with near terror. The situation was quickly defused by Evan’s reassurance - as well as realisation of who Evan resembled. Or rather, who the hooded boy from before resembled - bar Moglet, who calmly observed her fellow grimalkin’s faces. “Please, hear King Mausinger out.” Evan had quickly announced before any of them could say anything.

The grimalkin took Mausinger’s apology and promise that he would now work towards bringing the two species together in equality in, to Roland, surprisingly good stead - begrudgingly, he could see in some of them, but the rest of them observed seriously and nodded along.

“But what about our houses?” One of the older grimalkin asked after a moment of silence. “We want our homes back, but mousefolk are living there, I can guess.” A pause - understandable, as it was barely an hour since Mausinger found his new resolve. “I know we can find a way…” Evan began.

“We can stay at the inn in the meanwhile, right?” Moglet spoke up, softly. “It might take some time. There has never been enough houses in Ding Dong Dell, after all.” The grimalkin glanced at each other before nodding in agreement, murmurs being that it was already miles better than a musky tower. “I must thank you for the understanding.” Mausinger replied, one of the soldiers already running out of the sewers. “And acceptance. I will not fail my people. Not once more.”

Quietly, the grimalkin went to pack up their belongings, then they trailed out of the sewers. The two kings and their companions followed after a few more encouraging words to each other.

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Word spread fast through both vocal gossip and Leafbook posts, and by the time the group returned to the Dellian castle - mid-afternoon, from the position of the sun- a large group of Ding Dong Dell’s residents had gathered outside of it, grimalkin and mousefolk alike. It seemed like the latter had accepted the change in power quite well.

“As for the Mark of Kings, I shall entrust it in your care until the issue of the Horned One is taken care of.” Mausinger said to Evan as they entered the castle. “You may have need of it yet.” “Thank you.” Evan replied, “I hope I will return it to you very soon.”

Evan and Mausinger stepped inside the throne room - Lofty hurried in after them, while the others stood outside it, as with the various soldiers, mages and maids. One of them lifted a Leafbook as the two kings stopped before the throne. A nod, and Evan brought out the Declaration. Mausinger observed the treaty with some curiosity.

“A question, King Evan. Regarding the treaty-” “Yes, yes, it does float, by flip! Flippin’ eck...”
Lofty grumbled, having heard the question once too many, but Mausinger stared at him, frowning. “While that is interesting, that is not my question. There will be no backing out of the treaty once signed, yes?” “Of course not, mun!” The Dellian king smiled in answer. “I am glad to hear that.” Turning to Evan, Mausinger brought out his sword. “Shall we swear the pact?”

Lofty clapped, and the scroll floated up between the two kings, unfurling. “Let our nations be joined for the sake of the word.” Evan spoke, raising the Kingsbond-bound wand. “Let the banners of war ne’er again be unfurled.” Mausinger continued- with a strike of the two royal items, the runes on the paper floated out for one final time. It turned to the remaining empty space, and Oakenhart’s sigil appeared on it. The green runes returned to the Treaty.

The entire crowd was silent- then Mausinger stepped forward, un-summoning his sword and raising his hand. Evan took it, and they shook hands- someone in the crowd began clapping. The clapping grew louder, even as the scroll rolled up and disappeared.

The Declaration was complete.

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They had stayed at Ding Dong Dell a while longer before returning to Evermore- Mausinger had much to attend to. When they returned, the citizens quickly hurried over with questions of their own, but Bracken had quickly announced that there were information on Leafbook. Once the crowd had fully dispersed, the six gathered in the throne room. An uneasy silence quickly replaced the sense of respite. “Naverre said his plans were complete.” Evan began hesitantly. “Then…”

Roland was acutely aware of the stare, and checked himself. The pinch registered just below his right shoulder. And if his gut feeling- an acutely churning, wretched feeling that he’d disregarded for a while- was correct… “If Naverre hadn’t immediately revived the Horned One, there’s probably something he’s waiting for.” But what if he was wrong? “Kingmakers are tangible creatures, right? That means there should be a place for landing.”

“That is correct.” The Junior Consul kept his hand on his glasses. “Kingmakers are an integral part of their nation. We can assume that bringing back the Kingmaker, by extension, will retrieve the nation itself from where it is lost.” “So it’s a question of where it happens.” Tani commented. “But hasn’t this Allegoria been gone for millenia? Any tales of it is probably by mouth, or something.”

“Wait.” Bracken took out her tablet. “I think the database’s got something.” “Pray tell.” Bracken nodded in response to Leander before tapping a few times on the tablet. “Alle... oop. Here we go. The king of Allegoria- Naverre, probably- two millennia ago who made a pact with the Horned One- an attempt to make his kingdom greater by bending this singular evil to his will.” A pause. “But it didn’t work- instead, Allegoria disappeared entirely. People say that the king couldn’t handle the Horned One’s all-consuming corruption and the continent Allegoria stood on was spirited away to a place between worlds as a result.” Bracken shrugged as she put away the tablet. “Welp, guess it didn’t tell us where it originally was.”

“It’s okay! It tallies with what we’ve heard from Niall.” Evan hummed, hand on chin. “Ancient information… do you think there’d be information in Boddly’s library?” “I’d slow down a little if I were ye, Evan lad.” Batu said. “Ye’ve only just settled things with an old nemesis, completed yer goal of unitin’ the world- ye’re gonna crash if ye chug on at the speed ye’re at.”

The young king sighed. “We may have little time before Naverre carries out his plan. So knowing something about the Horned One- or Allegoria, even- before it happens will help us a lot.” “In that case, I’ll go.” Leander answered. “If I may be so bold, I am afraid such restlessness will spread in Evermore if the people see their king running about. Where is this Boddly’s library?” “In Goldpaw.”
Tani raised her hand. “I’ve been there before, I can take you.” “It will be much appreciated, thank you.” With a nod of approval from Evan, the two disappeared in the standard blue light of the teleportation spell.

It was a rock and a few hard places, the more it was thought about. Roland raised his hand. “Do you think we should send a messenger to the other nations to warn them on the matter?” Bracken shook her head, “Nah- they’ve all got Leafbooks, remember? I’ve already sent a message their way.” “Oh.” A rock and a few hard places. The engineer had turned to the young king. “Anyway, Evan: why don’t you come along to the workshop and help out with the machines? It’s tested and proved that tinkering with metal helps blow off steam.” “Well…” Evan turned to Roland, who gave a reassuring nod. It was a long day for the young king. "I'll come by later." “…alright, Bracken, I’ll give it a try.”

Footsteps crunched on the carpet, there was just him and Batu left standing in the throne room. And a grumble noted him that Lofty was still around. Wasn’t hard to guess that the Cloud Snake was fuming. If he was wrong then there was little time- the world was more than unfair to Evan already. He didn’t want to add to it. The carpet lining the throne room floor grew in detail, and he looked up, a breeze of magic gathering. “Lad—”

“There’s somewhere I want to go.” A lie: he just wanted to be anywhere but here. “I’ll be right back.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 89! Wow, we've went from one problem into the next in like the same day didn't we

I'm aware there's a grimalkin/mousefolk couple in DDD but I guess they aren't comfortable with saying it when there isn't concrete proof the oppression laws' been abolished.

Now. Trust me on this- I've literally written at least two scenarios for this bit but this particular Roland's been yelling in my ear that if he happens to heck off into the void during that it'd be in front of his colleagues/friends/unofficially adopted son(who'd only just seen his biological father pass into the afterlife, especially)/people who'd be freaked out about it and he doesn't want that. So I'm drop-kicking him into trying to pull an old cat (or the otherworld equivalent of it, probably whamster or smth). It's definitely not the best mode of action, but he'll get his sense back soon.

Some of the cutscenes've been moved earlier. Once Act 9 rolls along we'll be going at like. 90mph in terms of plot, most likely.
The blue light dissipated, and Roland ran. Along grass, up a slope, then his foot caught on something and he stumbled, strands and pressure brushing against his left hand and gasps ringing in his ears.

He was neither aware of when he had arrived nor for how long he had been kneeling, but when his breaths petered out and he picked himself up, he was looking at a cliff- beyond it, horizon of blue splashed with gold and green. Strange rock outcrops and mountains in the distance.

The clearing where it all began. He felt himself smirk on the strange symbolism that he’d picked, consciously or not. Technically, he’d seen it through Evan’s building of Evermore- beyond that, actually. The Declaration was complete, after all. He’d more than achieved what he’d promised.

A breeze tugged at his hair as he sighed. So… he had to admit, it was fitting that his end would be where his mission began-

“Tell me why ye’re doin’ this, Roland.” Roland turned around to see Batu, a few paces away- strangely, he didn’t look angry. “How did you know I was here?” “Lofty told me where ye’d teleported off to.” A sigh. “Get it off yer chest.”

A part of Roland’s mind immediately regretted teleporting- but he could talk. “The least I could do is sparing everyone from seeing it happen when it does.” “They know.” “I still don’t want them to see it. Especially not Evan-” The grass was easier to look at as he took a breath. “You know Aranella, right?”

Batu nodded. “Governess and maternal figure to the lad, I’ve heard.” “Mm. Evan had to watch her die.” He remembered what the younger boy had told him, back when they joked not to tell anyone. “And… his father too, most likely.” He was more than aware what he meant to Evan, and he repeated what he’d told himself. “The world’s been more than unfair to him. I don’t want to add to that.”

“Well- look ‘ere.” Batu took a step closer. “Even if ye were gone, it’d only take a beatin’ out o’ one Horned One and one Naverre before the latter tells us how to fish ye out of there.” Roland frowned while the Cloud Snake continued, “Ye heard the tales, didn’t ye? An old man’s just a walk in the park to him.”

Roland wasn’t sure what to say about that, but Batu had cleared his throat. “We’ve known about yer condition for… what, a few weeks. If ye think we ain’t prepared a little, ye would’ve been workin’ here for months for nothin’, mark me words. Ye’re the one needin’ all the help ye can get before ye get shuffled off into nowhere.”

The drifting breeze brought a chill. A few minutes passed as Roland debated inwardly. “I promised myself that I wouldn’t make anyone worry.” He found himself muttering. If they did, they would, whether he ran off or not, he reasoned. And… they did, didn’t they? “Guess that’s not going to happen.” “Not gonna happen. Ye’re worryin’ yer arse off, for starters.” “Heh.” The cold breeze was calming. Perhaps the least he could do was to let them know where he was when as Batu said, he got shuffled off to nowhere. “Pretty selfish of me, wasn’t it…”
Rustles of leaves, far away. Kettle the Higgledie lit the surroundings with an ember, the sky now indigo. Batu coughed and spoke. “Ye haven’t been gone for long. No one’s gon’ say anything about old men goin’ for a drink and a quick chinwag ‘bout old times.” “Old-” Roland smiled. “You’re not that old. How old are you?” “Old enough to take care of an old man. Or two.” Batu grinned. “So. How’s goin’ home ‘nd preparin’ to beat up a king ‘nd his Kingmaker sound?”

Uneasiness lingered- Roland took a breath to push it away. Just for a while longer. He’d have plenty of time for solitude soon, and… right now, he wasn’t alone. Perhaps he could afford to be a bit selfish. “That’d sound good. I can beat him up a second time when I get back.” “Atta boy.”

They had walked back down the slope when Roland cleared his throat. “Batu?” “Yeah?”

“Thanks.” He meant it. “I’ll… try my best not to lie down and give up.” Batu ruffled the Chief Consul’s hair. “Ye’d better not.” “Gotcha.”

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Despite saying so, Roland couldn’t shake the feeling of something being off, as he fiddled with the drone. Something off about Naverre, even with the few times they’d faced off. He patted the metal orb, and it fluttered up, whirring. Batu had dropped him off at the workshop before returning to his work, and Roland was proven to on Bracken’s words quickly.

"What’s your opinion on what Naverre’s trying to do, Roland?" Bracken suddenly said, raising her goggles. “I’m saying he probably got tricked by his Kingmaker, going by what we heard in Ding Dong Dell, but Evan says that can’t be the case. Evan?” “Kingmakers are their nations’ guardians.” Evan looked up from the screw he was trying to affix to a robot, sniffing briefly. “Like Leander said, they’re integral parts of the nation. Harming it can’t do any good to them. And… I can’t imagine an evil Kingmaker, really, because they’re meant to protect. Plus, if the Horned One was evil, why would Naverre be reviving it?”

“I replied that he just wanted his nation back. Kingmakers can be killed, right?” The Minister of Ingenuity sent a robot whirring out of the workshop. Roland brought his hand to his chin. “But if we go by what the database had, the king couldn’t handle the corruption. Why would he be able to defeat the source of it now?” Wait. “Wait- I remember Leander said he could’ve been why the nations from three hundred years ago were mostly gone. And maybe even before that…”

“From three hundred years ago…” Bracken crossed her arms. “How many Kingsbonds does he have?” “Enough to determine that he’s got enough…” Roland didn’t like the implications. “But how did he determine it was?” “That’s true…”

The three were either crossing their arms and pacing around the room or raising their hands to their chins. Then Roland found Evan had sneaked over before he noticed, staying close. He noticed Evan’s eyes looked a bit puffy and raised his arm to hold around the young king’s shoulders, prompting Evan to look up. “Sorry about earlier,” Roland whispered. Evan nodded. “I- “ The door of the workshop opened, interrupting Evan before he could continue his sentence.

“Oi!” The three turned to see Tani at the door. Evan got up. “You’re back!” “Aye, we found something! Leander’s brought it to the conference room. Told me to get everyone there. I’m gonna fetch pops, so head over, wont’cha?”

Chapter End Notes
In all honesty, I had considered having the sad dad-son duo comfort each other but. Honestly, neither of them's really in a state to achieve that, so I guess someone else's got to take that up.

Thank you for reading chapter 90! Well, if anything, at least Roland sorts himself out a bit faster now? I guess. He's still not like, great but he's trying?? I also added a tiny bit of speculation because like. Naverre's characterization is kind of different. Feel free to speculate along lol

Either way I think y'all know what we'll be seeing next chapter aka the Mornstar slab.
When they arrived in the conference room (Niall seemed to have taken a liking to the bed in the guest suite), Leander and Li Li were standing in front of the desk, a strange stone slab sitting on it, above a map of the world. It was unlike what Roland remembered to be in Boddly’s library—those were flat, colored but rarely decorated, but this... it was different. Intricate designs decorated what must be the upper edge of it, and scarlet fabric marked... handles, apparently. Hau Ling nodded in greeting, holding a stack of books in one arm and flipping through one with the other. She lowered the stacks, nodded again, and left the room.

Leander looked up, grimace visible when Evan tried to get a better peek at the engravings. “You all have gone to the library?” “I haven’t.” Bracken commented as she took out her mechanical tablet. “These aren’t registering in any of the fonts we’ve got.” Leander turned around to look at the bookshelves. “I believe these are no ordinary letters—none that I am familiar with. After all, according to Miss Boddly, this dates back to two thousand years ago—the time period we are looking for.”

Bracken tapped on her tablet as she suggested, “A code, maybe?” “I tried suggesting it, but the idea was dismissed.” The Junior Consul pursed his lips. “On that note, it would do well for me to be reminded not to go there a second time.” Roland smirked. “Can’t stand the old lady, can you?” “Not very.” “Sentiment’s shared.”

“But she did tell us to look for Li Li for help when Leander asked if it could be some kind of encrypting magic.” Tani piped up, having just entered the room with Batu. “Keeps the words from being read.” “I have been practicing decoding magic, yes.” Li Li turned a page on the book Hau Ling handed her. “In fact, some of you should’ve had seen my handicraft.”

Oh. Roland took out the slate-grey book, and Li Li nodded. “That’s the one.” “Mileniyah didn’t credit you.” “That’s because she was the one to provide the materials.” The young sorceress turned back to the enigmatic stone construct, having taken out a vial of sparkling gold powder. “I may be the one to work the spell, but she was the one to create it. As with the more unique spells I’ve taught you. Now...” She uncorked the vial. “If what Mister Junior Consul says is true, it should work.”

As the six watched with bated breath, Li Li turned the vial and poured its contents onto the tablet. She took out a wand, muttered some words, and the powder melted into warm gold light. “And now we wait.” It didn’t take long before Tani spoke up. “Why is it important that Leander’s right?” “While I can handle decoding magic, I am yet a novice. I may not be able to work on artifacts from other eras.”

And it didn’t take long for the message to sink in. Roland looked at the diary he held, then at the tablet. Leander was already staring at the former in interest, Evan joining in soon after. “You mean this is from two millennia ago as well?” Roland asked, to which Li Li nodded. “I can’t say that it is, exactly, but you can assume it is from that era.”

Well, he wanted to get the almost hungry stares off him. He handed the diary to Leander, inwardly uttering an apology to its writer. The other four huddled around the Junior Council, Lofty even jumping on the table to join in. A few minutes later, Leander looked up, and Roland raised his hands at the intense expression. “It— it’s too much of a coincidence to be from Allegoria of all places, wouldn’t it now?”

“That is true.” Leander pushed up his glasses, handing the diary to Evan, who flipped over the
pages again while the sky pirate dad-daughter duo observed. “But there is a good chance it is.” “The person mentioned the Kingmaker being ‘tamed’, right?” Bracken shrugged. “Seems to fit the bill with what we have on Allegoria.”

“But why would I get it out of what: a few hundred thousand people?” Roland asked. “It just seems too good to be true for an entire hint for Allegoria to be in-“ Quite literally, “-arm’s reach.” “Your arm.” Leander and Bracken replied immediately. Wait a minute. “You know, Bracken?” Evan looked up from the diary, a bit sheepish. “Sorry, Roland! I… blurted it out earlier.” “Oh- that’s alright.” “In any case,” Leander continued, “Kingmakers are linked with their nation- you may have gained access due to it. Where did you find these pages?” “The Dreamer’s Doors.” Evan answered, and Leander’s expression only got more serious. “Mileniyah gave us- well, Roland- the key to open them.” “Who is this Mileniyah?” “She worked in Boddly’s library before I joined.” Li Li spoke in answer to the Junior Consul. “Even then, I don’t know much about her.”

Tani passed the diary back to Roland, who considered the- actually pretty high, now that he thought about it- possibility of the king in question being Naverre before speaking, “It still doesn’t solve our problem on where Allegoria was, but it could be a negotiation chip…” “That’s true.” Evan hummed. “Maybe learning that we know something about him will help us get him to listen.” “Okay.” The slate-grey book was slid over the table, and Evan took it.

The golden light from on the tablet faded, and Li Li took a look. “Well, now. It worked.” The six gathered to look at the words, now decipherable. A sigil of… a cup had appreared next to them.

"The great evil laid to rest, the sacred s WORDe, its purpose mette, diD take the forme of a humble cuppe. Should e’er a king have neede of it again, he must needs visit that seldom-trod land where silence reigneth. There, at the place of the great frozen bowle, he must speak thusly: ‘Cuppe awake, sworde to make’. Once claimed, the cuppe needeth only to be married to the base of a kingmaker’s bond, and lo, the sword shall live again.”

A thump, and Roland looked up to see Leander having turned around to rest his head against the wall. “I… guess it wasn’t what we were looking for?” Tani commented. “You tried your best.” Bracken said in reassurance, raising the slab by its handles. “I’m sure we can make use of this information-” “Hrm!” Batu said suddenly. “Hrm…” “What’s wrong-” “Hold it there, lassie.”

Roland looked at what Batu had rest his finger on- cracks on the back of the tablet, then at Batu, who was now staring at the table. At the map. Roland observed at the slab. Two lines: long, winding, yet jutting at points cracks down the sides, then a circular, yet scribbly one in the center. It was too good to be true, but… didn’t that look like the edges of the continents on the map? And since the circular mark was missing from the map they had...

“That looks plenty peculiar, ain’t it?”

Once Batu had pointed it out, the five gathered around the tablet again. “Oh.” Evan muttered, eyes widening. “Yeah, these do!” “W-what? What does?” Li Li sighed at Bracken trying to peek over the tablet. “Allow me, Miss Bracken.” “Great, thanks! Now what’s going on?”

“These indentations on the back.” Batu reiterated. “The land couldn’t have broken up in millenia, could it?” “There are the rifts.” Leander answered, pushing up his glasses. “But never mind that- you raise an intriguing hypothesis.” “You’re saying…” Evan’s eyes widened. “The edges could refer to the shores of the continents? Then this in the middle…”

“Could be Allegoria.” The Cloud Snake concluded. “We might just’ve struck gold, mateys.”
Chapter End Notes

Well, why not make the item of plot progression even more plot progression-ey?

Thank you for reading Chapter 91! I guess I'm making Mileniyah even more mysterious than she probably should be but I guess that's how it happens *shrug*
Going in small groups and asking around on the matter of the central seas quickly got results. Whether it was Ketch and his crew of shipwrights or Glaucus, one of the veteran Hydropolitan fishermen who’d moved to Evermore for a living, they all agreed that those parts of the seas were never peaceful, despite its appearance, and therefore were steered clear of.

One of the comments the shipwrights had given piqued their interest. “Ye know, it’s like the tides are goin’ around something, but that somethin’ ain’t there, and the sea doesn’t know what t’ do so it messes up the waves, like.”

As the night grew darker, the six regrouped in the library, sitting around the desk, where the stone slab from before was placed. “It seems like we can assume Allegoria is in the middle of the central sea for now.” Leander said.

The library was quiet. A clock chimed somewhere—midnight—Roland could see that next to him, Evan was nodding off. Even Tani was trying to stifle a yawn or two. “...Evan?” “Hm...” “Do you want to head off to bed?” The young king shook his head. “No.” A murmur. “Want to be here.” Roland thought for a while, then looked to his right, at the wall, mostly vacant. “Can you stand up?” This was the most he could do.

A few minutes later, once Evan was snoozing, a blanket draped over him(somehow, Tani had kept a few stored in her arms band), Roland looked up from where he sat, back against the wall. Batu chuckled lowly. “On second thought—” Roland muttered, “—maybe offering myself as a pillow with my circumstances isn’t—” A shift from his lap, and he looked down. “...Roland?” “I’m right here, Evan. Go back to sleep.” “Hear that change in tone?” “Batu, please.”

Tani grinned, and a few more blankets landed neatly the table. She took one, unfolded it, and strode over, sitting down next to Roland and letting the blanket float down with a flourish. “Uh, Tani—” “I’m not going anywhere.” As Roland blinked, he saw that Leander had a mild smile on his face. “Don’t tell me—” “I may be a little too old for that, Roland.” “Well.”

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The night, somehow, passed peacefully enough. When the clock chimed five, a beeping sound came from where the desk was, and Bracken sat straight up, stopping the alarm. The two nodded in greeting, then the minister of ingenuity had drowsily left the library with squeaks of metal.

Then Leander had lifted his head from the desk with an annoyed grumble—then he turned around. “Ah—thank goodness,” Leander sighed, putting on his glasses. “There you are—” “Good morning, Leander. You’ve been awake quite a few times—” “You know I’m a light sleeper.” Evan stretched—Roland raised his hand in a shushing gesture, but it was too late; the young king had quite literally jumped to his feet, jolting Tani awake as well. “Ro—” “I’m right here.”

It seemed like the alarm had woke most of them up. After a few more minutes, the blankets were folded and stored, and Roland stood, stretching. “Ye didn’t sleep at all?” Batu asked. Roland shook his head. “Aye, understandable.”

“We should prepare ourselves for the day.” Leander announced. “I have a feeling we have much
Bracken suggested taking their airship to survey the area once they had assembled in the throne room.

“But didn’t Glaucus say that the seas there were empty?” Tani asked, stretching. Bracken nodded. “Yeah, but they’re only looking at it horizontally. The seas around them. Maybe a bird’s eye view can give us a different result.”

“Bracken has a point.” Roland raised his hand to his chin. “Plus, he did say the tides there were dangerous- I don’t think they really got close enough…” “In that case, I should be of help.” Leander said. “If there were any anomalies magic-wise, I should be able to detect them.” “Count me in too.” Batu added. “I’ve got a good eye for miles.” Evan brought a hand to his chin. “Alright… How long will it take?”

The engineer tapped on her mechanical tablet. “An hour to and back, approximately. Can you give me your Leafbook, Evan?” He did, and after a while, the Leafbook was returned to him, a transmitter fitted onto it. “I’ve linked up the footage with the one on the Zippelin. You’ll be able to see it once we’ve got the old girl up and flying.”

The three had gathered around the throne where Evan sat, Lofty half-hanging over the top of it. At first, there was nothing but clear skies and seas- then the transmitter crackled. “How’s the footage, Evan?” “It’s loud and clear, Bracken.” Evan replied. A second voice joined in. “I cannot emphasise enough that this… science is quite intriguing.” “Heh. We’re still heading to our designated spot. Won’t take long before then.”

A muffled shout from the other end, and Tani pointed to a point on the Leafbook. “Are those… storm clouds?” The tablet was small, but where the sky pirate had pointed, there were indeed speckles of grey. “Don’t worry about it!” Bracken answered. “The old girl’s built to deal with storms.”

A squeak from the throne room door, and Roland looked up to see a beige Higgledie running into the throne room, a girl in a blue dress rushing after it. “Help me catch the lil’ kid!” She yelled, and he scooped up the Higgledie as it waddled past him. It squeaked and struggled. “Here.” Roland muttered as the girl took the Higgledie- it calmed down immediately.

“What happened?” Leander asked from the other side of the transmitter once the new(?) citizen left the throne room, muttering. “New citizen, I guess.” Roland answered. “I heard she mentioned something about Higgledies running about…” Tani said. “Higgledie…” Leander was probably pushing up his glasses. “Such information is worrying.” “I’ll go ask more about it.” Tani answered, heading out. “Be right back.”

Meanwhile, the footage on the Leafbook showed darkening clouds- then a boom of thunder. “Oh boy, it’s raining.” Bracken said, “Not gonna affect the lens, though-”

The image shook- or was it… Roland held his arm against the side of the throne. A thrumming dizziness that droned out sound. He blinked twice, and the screen of the Leafbook came into focus- a flash of lightning. “Batu! It’s not safe outside!” Leander shouted from the other end of the transmitter. Another arc of lightning-
“Yoy, mun!” Lofty had dropped down in front of Roland, making him jolt. “Youer ears waxed or sumthin’?” “I, uh…” “Roland?” Evan had noticed too. “You look pale…” He took a breath. “I’m-”

A sudden stab of pain cut him off- spiking in his chest. Not here, not now- not when- Tension in front of it as he grabbed the jacket’s fabric- then even that was overwhelmed. Two voices, far away, calling- calling his name? He didn’t know. Everything hurt, everything- red carpet- then red turned into blue and voices and a faraway yell and the blue shook-

And it ended, and Roland stared, everything blurring into a mesh of color. Unable to move. Voices, almost audible but unrecognisable. A shadow over him, red carpet filling half of view. Even staring tired. A green object, further away, next to yellow. A whisper of a thought that in the end, it still happened. There was something, before everything sank; one last attempt.

On the green, grey, and among the grey, a sliver of dark red.

‘I'm sorry.’

Chapter End Notes

It's not over yet.

Okay well thank you for reading Chapter 92! Please stick with me sdlkfjs I don't really know what to say for this chapter apart from aaa yall probably know from the tags that it's not over yet aaaaaa

Edit: Thank you for 100 kudos sdlkfjst
The fated day

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I did not start watching NNK until I was writing Act 3 also strap in your seatbelts

A familiar sense of fear jolted him into action.

He shook the handle, and at the resistance, found the door locked.

His first thought was of his king’s safety- he cast his hand out, intending to override the lock, but the wall exploded instead. A scream from outside noted him that he probably scared one of the maids, and with a wave most of the rubble were moved inside the room before he ran out, shouting a hasty apology.

He really ought to have a better check on his emotions, he thought to himself, but there were shouts from down the corridor, where the throne room was. A fresh surge of terror, a voice riddled with the beginnings of age. “You must listen to us!” He knew it, and quickened his pace.

“Your Kingmaker said that? You are much too dependent on him.” The jumble of voices returned, overlapping, but he could hear. “Do not hide from the truth! You are much too gullible for your own good, Your Majesty.” “Lower your arms and stop your tomfoolery!” A flare of anger, much rekindled in the past, whirled and he acted on it.

He reached an arm and motioned to his right, and the group of ministers were lifted and thrown aside, revealing his king, covering his ears. “Your Majesty!” He yelled, closing the distance, and Noumenia appeared in his hand as he pointed it at the ministers, pale yellow blade gleaming with white patterns as magic kept them pinned to the ground.

“Ah, Kingmaker.” One of them looked up from the ground, a smirk on his face. “It seems we can count on your protection of the king any time soon.”

The flare expanded- a rumble began along the roof. “I may have patience for your harangue.” His hand tightened on the sword. “But you do not threaten my king.” “Of course not.” Another minister with the same intricate gold headdress spoke up, calm as ever. Had he…? “But you do realise what you are doing, yes? This is a great violation of peace.”

As though on cue, a sift of dust from the ceiling, and he paused.

What would the former kings think if they saw this spectacle: the people supposed to serve turning on themselves? It was only eight- nine years since the accident happened. Three years since his king formally inherited the throne. But- they had served the previous king. At least they were to be provided that amount of consideration. The rumble stopped, and he lowered his sword. “I believe it would do good for both you and His Majesty to let us step in now and then.” The ministers picked themselves up, a few of them smiling- smirking. “Perhaps we shall take our leave? It would be what you would suggest, is it not, Kingmaker?”
He still stood between his king and the ministers, and stepped aside. The young king nodded, fern-green locks that reached just below chin shaking at the movement. “I- I would appreciate that, yes... “ “Alas, that means we would be unable to give our formal reports- but no matter. It will not delay much.” They stood, bowed, and left with a few chuckles. He kept his sigh low and turned to his king, whose composure shook, but held firm. “Are you alright, Your Majesty?” “Yes...” A sniff. “I’m sorry...” It was not his fault. “It’s-” As Kingmaker, he would not leave his king alone, but perhaps his actions did obstruct the meeting. “I am to blame, Your Majesty.”

The king frowned. It was quiet until he spoke. “They’ve been trying to isolate us.” For a moment, the locked door came into mind, but that had become a question, wandering between certainty and not- reassurance would be better suited. He stepped back, and got on one knee. A gesture of loyalty.

“It will not happen.” He would see to it that they wouldn’t. At his king’s frown, he considered that worry was understandable. “You are my king. I am your Kingmaker. The Kingsbond shall guide us back to each other.” A sniff, and he looked up. “Your Majesty-” An expression of sadness and... frustration. A pang of guilt. The events just now were unprecedented, so it would be a shock. But what now?

As Kingmaker and mentor, the king’s duties must not be slowed down- he knew what would be said about that, but as a guardian, as a... he stood up. “I would suggest you get some rest first, Your Majesty. Of course, the patrols will be carried out, so will the writing of the reports, but...” He saw a nod in response, and reached a hand out. As a guardian. His king wiped away his tears.

“Let’s go, Naverre.” He said, much too aware of the snaking pit of emotions.

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It was only at late night that he finished looking for words. A word of advice given from long ago: to write it out, write it down somewhere. Lowering the quill, he noticed that it had begun to rain outside- grey clouds have been hanging over the skies since afternoon. He could still smell the humidity. His back settled against the chair as he watched his king- Naverre slumber in the bed, underneath the large window.

Not once in the twenty thousand entries had he expected the situation now: it was in his pride that he did not, and now he paid sorely for it. He turned back to the table and stared at what he had written in the diary.

He had to make the decision. There was no ignoring the feeling that something would happen. And... he knew that he was fast losing his grip on the situation.

There was something ironic about a figure of power feeling utterly helpless.

He considered if he was losing his grip. Even now, he was questioning if keeping watch was an overreaction that would impede his king’s growth and autonomy. But he was meant to protect his king, it was his responsibility. And it was his wish.

He stood up, went over to Naverre, lowering his hand to brush a lock of fern-green hair away. But he had to do something about the situation. After all, he had told and been told multiple times that if one wanted to change things around them, then they had to start with themselves.

Perhaps the only way out was a step as drastic, as desperate as this. Time would tell if it was worth it.

He stood up, went back to the desk, sat down and raised his hand to his chest, calling forth the
Kingsbond. A line of grey and green, glowing with energy.

After all, Kingmakers were formed from containing great powers with a soul, and he knew how it was manipulated—knowledge, now ancient, well etched into him. Surely the reverse can be done. To leave the great power intact, connected to the Kingsbond… it meant unraveling himself from it.

He concentrated, and soon, a spark of pain that spread throughout; taking away all senses. Not hard to imagine he was practically ripping himself apart at the seams. Thinking back, there was no memory of what had happened when he had become a Kingmaker— it was simply pain one second, and looking at the first king of Allegoria (not the first; simply the first he had been Kingmaker to) the second. Put in limbo.

The smell of rain returned, and he was staring at one end of the Kingsbond that folded and spun in strands around an orb of pitch black. It almost looked like a flower. He raised his hand to look. Still a pallid blue, but he could sense a lack of strain.

...so the operation... had succeeded? The Kingsbond floated towards Naverre, still slumbering in response.

He stared at his hand again. It was fast losing its blue color, and his head felt lighter— when he raised his hand, instead of feeling metal horns, it now came down on hair. As he was now, he should look... no different from a normal humanfolk. Despite now being completely in the unknown, he couldn’t help but smile.

This was going to take a while to get used to-

A blast of wind knocked him back, and he looked up: it came from what must be the great power, the orb of pitch black, larger than before. He stood up, frowning. Was it taking form? But— a second, stronger blast of wind, and he brushed hair from his eyes.

Something was wrong. He could barely stand against the wind— the flower of darkness expanded— grew upwards— and then he saw it.

A ethereal form being dragged upwards from Naverre. His soul. A cry muted by the wind as he fought against it— A flash of blue and yellow and the soul disappeared with the Kingsbond— the ceiling broke as the line rose. He ran forward to his king, raising him from his bed with his arms. Raindrops and dust from the open ceiling. He was limp. It couldn’t be. He shook. “Your Majesty!”

It couldn’t be, it couldn’t be— Naverre’s eyes cracked open. A leap of his heart. “Your Majesty—” His king’s eyes focused on him, then a faint whisper.

“Doloran… why—” Then life left the eyes and there was no more but the sound of rain and the smell of rain and humidity and—

Naverre. Naverre— Naverre— he— it was his fault. It was— he lowered his king back onto his bed, staring up. A lock of silver hair that he brushed aside. Golden forms and rubble— pieces of buildings rising into the sky— into a crack.

Ripped at the seams.

“Don’t worry, Naverre.” His throat twisted and fractured as he spoke. Noumenia appeared in his hand. He still had his sword. He still knew how to channel magic. Channel the gravity itself. He still knew how to fight. “I’ll defeat it and we’ll all be fine.”

The weight in his legs nullified, and he leaped into the rain.
Doloran blocked an attack from another of the pitch-black monsters with his vambraces and willed himself forward to the next piece of suspended rubble. He knew what they were— who they were. Stolen souls and warped forms.

A blink of blood red, and he propelled himself before the piece of building beneath him crumbled in the laser. A flurry of pitch-black wings chased after him, and he gathered a spark of magic— wings crashed against a barrier. Feet brushed against stone. Still had to save energy to—

He turned and blocked a axe-wielding monster with his sword. The gash in his arm— and a few others— screeched from the rebound, the flap of wings catching up with him once again, another blink of blood red being his only warning. Leave the others: he had the great power to deal with! He knocked aside the monster and the gravity magic guided him forward. He knew the great power was close, and once he got there—

Movement from his left. Doloran turned, just in time to summon a barrier against the ivory block—but a cracking sound was the only warning that it wasn’t enough.

When the spots were blinked out of his eyes, he found himself sprawled on a platform— behind him, the King’s Cradle. He pushed himself up with Noumenia as support, and watched as the plume of black-red rise up over the edge, expression twisted in a mocking grin.

There was… no way he could defeat a creature that could end the world. He knew that even before he chased it down.

He still had Noumenia. It still stored dregs of the great power; and he still knew how to channel it.

In the recesses of his memory, knowledge, now ancient. A failed experiment where instead of disappearing in a flash of golden light, one had simply eroded into darkness, then into nothing, to be forgotten by the world. Another, somewhat more recent, where a fellow Kingmaker had lost control in a confrontation and in a flash, took the castle and its residents with it.

The great power raised a hand, and the same blood red energy from before gathered in it. He stared at it, then raised his sword.

He would see to it that he would make it happen. To keep the great power away from the world, and to keep it beyond anyone’s reach. He would see to it that he would never forget his own faults.

Even if it meant an eternal nightmare.

He leveled the sword at his chest.

If it were to be his redemption… so be it.

Red, and then pain, and then there was—

Someone grabbed his arm; Roland looked up at someone who looked much too like himself, in the ruins of an office that he hadn’t seen in weeks. Apart from the silver hair. The storm clouds that had been outside the window surrounded them, leaving only a small clearing.

"You must go.” Doloran spoke. The storm clouds were moving closer. “The Horned One grows stronger yet.” A pause, and the silver-haired man lowered his head. “Perhaps I should’ve known I would be condemning my soulmate to the same fate as mine, even before I considered becoming Kingmaker…” Before Roland could question it, Doloran had looked up, voice hasty. “Please,
Roland. I beg of you. Save Naverre. The person he is now is… a remnant of my mistakes.”

The dream was fast wavering, and Roland was still reeling from the sudden influx of information. Doloran flinched- the smell of humidity and rain was returning. The silver-haired man squeezed his eyes shut.

“Go!”

Before Roland could say anything, he was face-up, eyes closed. He kept them closed. Then he could hear rustling from somewhere- as more of the world beyond came into focus, he began to sense. Low whirring. The scent of an active sixth senser. A softness under his head. With that, he dared to open his eyes.

The ceiling of his room met his view, and in an instant, it blurred. A familiar color, a familiar voice and words of reassurance that he found himself unable to respond to.

He was… still in Evermore. Was still home.

For that moment, it was all he could really think of.
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Entry ---

This is the last time I shall write in this book as a Kingmaker. I have made up my mind to give up my powers. I see no other choice: Continuing to intimidate the court will only serve to worsen our already chilly relationships, and my king’s psyche will only worsen further if no action is to be taken. I do not know what will transpire once I have acted on my decision: but I will live out the rest of my mortal life serving my king, as I always have. In any case, Noumenia stores dregs of my powers yet, and when that runs out, it shall prove trusty as long as the great power once bonded to me stands sentinel. Hopefully, for the long ages to come- long after my mortal form becomes dust.

But right now, I am the Kingmaker, and I am to see that my nation will continue to flourish with its rightful kings. If anything happens, it shall be my blame, and my blame alone. I will not shed tears over it. I swear this on my entire self.

This is it. It is time to get it over with. Before my king wakes up and the court rustles yet again.

As per our nation’s motto: May hope bless Allegoria ever more.

Chapter End Notes

Y’see I didn’t expect this AU’s backstory to actually share elements to what went down in NNK aka terrible ministers and whoops I ended my country but heck I guess by the time I found out it was too late dskflj and Naverre's hair color was an aesthetic choice back then too well

Thank you for reading Chapter 93! A few things: My interpretation of soulmates probably a bit junked, but uh, I guess it goes like this: The events happening is more or less specific to the soul itself, for example having a son could be biological or well, finding a son figure, but to the soul it’s finding a son. To the soul of the son it’s like. Finding a dad, but for their soulmate it could be a different person. So uh?? yeah I guess
but also:

1. Roland was in Doloran's dream all along; his presence built something like a safehouse within it; and that's also why Doloran's been able to kick him out of the dream and never vice versa. 2. Doloran only revealed his name because he saw he was pretty much forgotten. 3. Naverre's kind of understood what's going down back then, 4. He's in the void and has been for two thousand years, thus the slight freak-out when he sees something entirely different from what he's been seeing for... a while. 4. Lofty's description on people disappearing in a blink when something goes wrong was an intentional plot error because that didn't happen to Roland; both Leander and Roland were right when talking about the mastery of gravity magic. 5. Doloran probably wasn't a king before then but he probably was a leader of sorts and 6. It is, in fact, Doloran's fault

That's about as much I can remember about what information I want to give atm but like. I'm throwing hands here I'm going to have to take a second break because I'm only just starting to work on Chapter 94 dsflkj I hope this reveal chapter was half of 'good enough' haha
If Roland tried to joke about it, he would say that he was starting to show his true age, but when just sitting up brought a whirl and a ring in his ears, he really couldn’t.

“How- how long have I been out, Tani?” Leaning against the wall, he watched as the pirate girl calmly activated a sixth senser and replaced the one that had been on a table next to his bed. The throbbing vertigo receded. Further away, a machine spun, whirring and releasing green mist. Toby settled on top of his head. “A few hours.” A pause. “Leander wanted you to not use magic for the meanwhile. How’re you doing?”

Not well, in short. Roland couldn’t register that he had his back to anything, or that he was turning his head when he did. He rolled the sleeve up from his left arm- a large patch of swirling black across the forearm, another near the thumb. The rest of his body couldn’t agree on whether it wanted to feel straining ache or nothing at all, and there was still the shaky feeling since waking from the dream. “I’m awake and talking.” Roland concluded, pulling down the sleeve. There were more crucial concerns. “The Horned One’s back, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Tani nodded, pulling over a chair and sitting. “Evan and pops are making sure everyone in Evermore are safe and sound, and Leander and Bracken’s gone back to Hydropolis and Broadleaf to help out their people.” She tapped on the Leafbook. “I’ve told them that you’re awake.”

“Thanks.” Roland frowned as Tani’s answer registered. “What exactly happened?” Tani grimaced, tapping her chin. “It’s kind of hard to explain, but I’ll try my best to repeat what I remember.” “Thank you, Tani.” Roland repeated, and a few beeps later, she held up the Leafbook.

The screen was that of a storm, twisters in the distance, then the picture became that of a scarlet vortex appearing in the clouds, then a meteor descending from it. Tani pointed to it. “This’s the Horned One.” A tap, and the picture changed to a golem-like creature, standing over jagged rocks. “When it landed, it raised a continent.” “It’s…” Considering how the Kingmaker- that almost looked like a mountain of spikes- towered over the landmass, “...enormous.” “Uh-huh.” Tani affirmed. “Pops said it was about the largest creature he’d ever seen.”

The next picture was that of Longfang- but the coloring was off, being completely scarlet instead of possessing the greens and gold Roland had seen before. “After that, the Horned One summoned fake Kingmakers to create some sort of barrier to protect it.” Tani continued. “Longfang, Brineskimmer, Bastion and Oakenhart- they’re all there.”

A close-up of the Horned One, expression fixed in a snarl, orbs of light flowing towards it. “After the barrier was up, it began absorbing souls from all over the world.” It struck a chime, and Roland squinted at the image. “Souls?” “Yeah. There were posts on Leafbook asking why their friends and family suddenly fell and didn’t respond to anything, and Leander deduced their souls were stolen by comparing them to Vermine’s situation. He said souls were the essence of life itself- so when they are stolen, the victims enter a state of living dead. They live, breathe, but they don’t respond to anything.” Tani exhaled. “We were worried that the same happened to you, but the symptoms weren’t right.” “We’re lucky it isn’t.” Roland brought a hand, pressing it against his mouth as he thought. “Did anyone in Evermore…?” “No. Lofty’s been protecting us.” Tani turned back to the Leafbook. “But look.”
With a tap, the Horned One was releasing some sort of dark cloud. “After absorbing all those souls, it released them as monsters. Bracken was forced to retreat because of that.” Tani scrolled to the next picture, where there was a slightly blurry image of a black creature- Roland jolted in recognition. He’d seen those in the dream. From an observer’s standpoint, the details were uncanny, and then there were other coincidences too- the words on the diary, how the ministers’ uniforms resembled Naverre’s, but in shades of purple and white.

“What’s wrong, Roland?” Tani asked. Roland raised his hand to his forehead. Were the events actually... real? “Long story.” He slipped into his boots, ignoring the sense of something missing from his sole and stood up from the bed. A glance at the window, and he paused when he saw the symptoms of the corruption rose in an arc up his jaw in the reflection, among others. “I shouldn’t go outside like this, should I?” “We explained you accompanied pops and the others on the survey and was hit by a bad curse.” Tani answered as Roland went to pick up his coat and gloves from the table. “So it should be alright.” “Still, seeing the Chief Consul like this probably will affect morality in times like these...” The best he could do was not to add to the panic- he had an idea. "Let's see what we can do about it."

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“Ye saw all of that while ye were down ‘nd out? And ye’ve been seeing this Doloran lad in yer dreams since ye got dropped in this world?” Batu commented, once the six had regrouped in the throne room an hour later and Roland had reported about the dream. “Ye’re right- that’s mighty uncanny.”

“You say he looked like you.” Leander added, hand on glasses. “Did he say anything about a term: ‘soulmate’?” Roland blinked and adjusted his scarf. He'd almost forgotten about that. “Yeah... yeah, he did.” “What’s this about soulmates?” Bracken asked. “Or am I misinterpreting it?”

“Roland is from another world.” Leander said, frowning in contemplation. “There are souls in this world that are inextricably linked with another in the other. One can say they are counterparts to each other, but the better term is that their souls are one and the same. Therefore, ‘soulmate’.” He glanced at Lofty, who jumped and uttered something about not knowing everything ‘on the face o’ the flippin’ earth, by yur’. “If Lofty was right about how Kingmakers are created: the soul being cast into a realm between worlds instantly if it failed, this proves the connection- and how Roland is still able to withstand the Horned One’s corruption, if at all.” “Ye mean the swab here shares a soul with a Kingmaker?” Batu scratched his head when Leander nodded. "Well now."

Unsure how to respond to that, Roland cleared his throat before considering the implications. “If that’s true, then it leads to another problem.” He mused. “If Doloran locked himself in a dream to seal away his Kingmaker half, the fact that I saw him in a dream after the Horned One’s resurrection probably means that the Horned One is what shouldn’t be brought back.” And that in a twist of fate, Naverre undid his Kingmaker’s efforts. “If even the former Kingmaker had no chance defeating it, what will?”

“I believe I can help you with that.”

“Queen Nerea.” Evan greeted. They turned to see the Hydropolitan queen, who nodded in greeting. “You must forgive me for the intrusion, and for listening in. This certainly is different from the tales of Allegoria I am used to.” “It’s the one Broadleaf’s archives have, right?” Bracken asked, prompting a glance from Leander, but Nerea nodded. “Precisely. However, I did not come solely to eavesdrop- allow me to provide my side of information. Our mages have detected that the stealing of souls by the Horned One is still occurring, but has slowed down by a fair amount.”

“Wait- why is the Horned One stealing souls?” Tani asked. “The stolen souls are to be considered
subjects.” Nerea answered. “You may remember the spell of rejuvenation I had used for the resurrection of Hydropolitans- it depends on the amount of souls that consider themselves Hydropolitans. The same applies for Allegoria- the more followers it has, by force or not, the stronger the Horned One grows.” “And there’s no knowing how much it wants. It’s already a mountain as it is...” Evan muttered, and Queen Nerea nodded.

“We may still have time before the crisis truly becomes insurmountable. Therefore, as for the question of what may bring down the Horned One…” The Hydropolitan queen crossed her arms. “…there is one possibility. An artefact of legend that smites even the deepest darkness.” She looked up.

“Have you heard of Mornstar?”

Chapter End Notes

Roland, probably more magic than man at this point: this is fine

Thank you for reading Chapter 94! We’re back to our usual 1k-1.5k words per chapter, and it’s a bit of a pacing thing before we start going on the Mornstar search quest, mainly to summarise what Roland missed and so on.

Considering how a rock Godzilla dropped in out of nowhere, people are dropping comatose and there’s an influx of supernatural monsters, the others went to get things under control in the short term, so Tani volunteered for watchover duty for the meanwhile.
Evan widened his eyes at Queen Nerea's question. “You have, Evan?” Tani asked, and he nodded hastily. “I’ve read about it!”

He summoned an ash-green book (Oh, of course) and opened to the first page. “Mornstar,” the young king read. “An artifact created and named in honor of the spell that returned light to the world, passed down ever since. When each king comes of age, they must journey to the silent land, where it was forged, to prove themselves…” Evan blinked. “Silent land; didn’t we hear that from-?” “The stone tablet we found the map on.” Tani recalled, clapping her hands. “‘Seldom-trod land where silence reign’ -eth!”

Queen Nerea held a pleasantly surprised smile. “So it seems like you already have knowledge of its whereabouts.” “The fact that the tablet we found to investigate Allegoria’s whereabouts was a hint to Mornstar is unexpected, but much welcomed.” Leander replied. “The tablet reads that in its base form, it is a cup, and to turn Mornstar into a sword, it must be, to quote, married with the base of a Kingmaker’s bond…” Nerea hummed, unaware of Evan’s polite smile and a mutter from Lofty before answering, “The wand King Evan possesses, I imagine. But the question as to where Mornstar lies persists.”

“I’ve got that covered.” Bracken answered, already tapping on her mechanical tablet. “It said something about a ‘frozen bowl’, and there’s a place I think would be cold enough. Jack Frost’s Playground, north of Broadleaf. There’s a crater to the east section of it. It’s our best shot at finding something resembling a bowl.”

“Impressive; it seems like we have a plan of action.” Queen Nerea smiled. “In that case, I shall leave you to it; regarding the Horned One, I will keep you and the others informed.” A bow, and the queen disappeared in teleportation magic. Evan frowned. “Have you been to Jack Frost’s Playground, Bracken?” Pyrite chattered and summoned a small ball of fire, Kettle following suit. “Yep, we’ve gone there a few times to scout out the crash site and its materials.” The Minister of Ingenuity crossed her arms. “But we’ll need much warmer clothing than what we currently have, it’s a lot colder there.”

“Duly noted.” Leander added. “The Horned One is also of concern. If the fiends it manipulates damage the Zippelin, it would bring grave consequences…” The conversation turned to what would be the best route- Roland noticed Lofty standing off to the side.

The logical thing to do was to stay behind and not be a worrying presence, but the thought of it dug up deep-seated unease. He wasn’t giving up, he tried to reason, but the argument concluded as soon as it started.

“Lofty.” He observed Bracken showing the mechanical tablet to the rest of the group as he spoke. “I don’t suppose there’s a territorial limit to your Kingmaker protection, is there?” The small Kingmaker blew a raspberry in response. “Pfft-ha! Youer ain’t thinking I’m as weak as that, ain’t cha?” Lofty’s expression grew serious soon after, gesturing. “Well, it is less of a hassle for you if you stay in Evermore bounds.”

He understood that. Before Roland had reported in on the dream, Leander had informed him that the symptoms matched up to magic fatigue, if not an alarmingly severe case of one. (The sixth
sensors hadn't been effective in alleviating the symptoms, so after some insisting they'd agreed on saving up the items.) And with the circumstances that led to his current state, it seemed that the Horned One’s physical return had pushed the compatibility over the boundary between being somewhat beneficial to being a pain in both meanings. But he had to keep going. For just a while longer.

“And if I don’t? Roland asked, and Lofty snorted. “Saw that question coming from a mile away, lad. I doubt if the Kingmaker protection’s going to let up, but… let’s say we kick something in. Kneel, won’tcha?”

Roland blinked. “...can we maybe not?” The last time Lofty pulled off a stunt like that Evan hadn’t even noticed, but here? In front of the others? Really? “Well, there is one other way.” It was the only warning before Lofty promptly jump-kicked him in the chest- with surprising force, too, sending the man tumbling. “Ow!” “Roland?” Evan spun around, expression alarmed. “There we go.” Lofty straightened up and wobbled off. The rest of the group were staring now, and Roland, seeing that the scarf had slipped downward, cleared his throat and gave a half-grin.

“I guess… that’s my okay sign to come along?”

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The airship was to be driven north, then turned east along the northern great rift to reach the wintry isles. With Lofty’s warning in mind, Roland had retreated to one of the couches fixed to the cabin walls. Even so, the new bout of combined vertigo and aches, once the golden grasslands were out of sight, hit him like a truck. He probably let it slip too, considering how Evan immediately sat next to him, asking if there was any way to help.

Roland managed a smile in response. “I’ll tell you if it gets worse.” He remembered something he had wanted to ask for a while. “Hey, Evan… that book from Mileniyah- is there any other pages on it?”

“The other page is a tale of the First Hero. A well-known legend even in my time.” Upon a second look, the Junior Consul already had the book- turning the page and humming as he read. “This is a ‘bare bones’ version, but… hm.” Evan tilted his head in response. “It has the same content as the one I saw in the Trial of Wisdom, I’m sure about that. But they weren’t encrypted...”

“But we already got help from the piece about Mornstar, right?” Bracken asked- the sky pirate duo had stood guard outside to watch for any wandering monsters. “Let me check.” Leander set down the article on the table and pushed up his glasses, and the conversation fell silent for a while. Then the engineer blinked.

“‘The evil dragon who ruled over the world could not be defeated until the four towers emitting the evil aura that protected him had been destroyed.’” Bracken looked up. “Isn’t that how the false Kingmakers have that barrier up around the Horned One?” Leander nodded, brows fixed in a frown before taking out a Leafbook. “That’s true. In the version I read, the hero’s companions worked in tandem, and this provides a similar narration. Perhaps that is how we must take down the barrier…”

“So it is a hint.” Roland rested the back of his head against the steel wall, yet again reminded of how much of a mystery the historian was.

“Indeed.” Leander spoke as he typed on the gadget. “But such coincidences beg question to whether Naverre had intentionally chosen to draw reference from this story, and if so, why. And… why the pieces Miss Mileniyah provided to Evan fit so snugly to the puzzle we face.” “We can rule this soulmate thing out, anyway.” Roland covered his forehead with his hand. It wasn’t that he couldn’t wrap his head around the subject: what did it mean to be counterparts to each other? “And
reincarnation seems to be out of the question as well, since we see Naverre in the living flesh.” Leander glanced at the Chief Consul. “You know what reincarnation is, yes?”

“Yeah, yeah.” The cycling rebirth of souls. What Doloran tried to do was a last-ditch effort at turning the situation around. Like he had, when he tried to use his upcoming resignation to convince the other national leaders to come together for the summit... whatever headache there was just seemed to get worse. Was he grasping at straws? To the side, Evan had his hand to his chin, deep in thought. A lock of hair slipped and hung in front of the young king. “I guess,” Bracken broke the silence, and they looked up. “I guess someone figured Evan needed the help?”

If he tried to recall, Evan did say the Dreamer’s Doors gave visitors what they needed when they opened them. But where did they come from, and when did people begin to know about what the doors could do? That was its own set of mysteries. Leander exhaled after a few seconds of quiet. “Let it be the case.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I'm just going with the idea that this Mornstar's just.... uh, named after that Mornstar. It's a lot more mundane but there's enough Mornstar to mornstar mornstar. Mornstar.

Thank you for reading Chapter 95! With the crew finding out about the tablet early we can kind of try to speedrun this bit of the plot. Unfortunately, school's started and honestly it's already starting to get busy so I can't update as often, but I'll try to make it a weekly update, if possible! So please bear with me haha.
Recurrence

Chapter Notes

Hopefully my writing style hasn’t changed *too* much. Or the lore I have. I think I’ll have to read my own fic again just to make sure. that's gonna be long hhhh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Calling it the Coldera’ was Zip’s idea from when we found the place during the Zippelin’s test flights.” Bracken commented as the crew, now in warmer clothing, stepped onto permafrost. It was still the early hours of the morning. “Quoting the man, ‘Because it’s a caldera? And it’s cold?’, so it stuck.” Leander muttered something ambiguous but audibly exasperated from under a muffler, whereas Lofty gave a loud cackle that sounded somewhat like chattering teeth in response. “T-that’s accurate all right! My feet’s fr-frfr-freezing right off.” “Didn’t ye have those, what, negotiation shoes?” Batu asked, “We all thought ye got them so we didn’t get Persha t-” “They were for negotiations only! Only! Using them for anything else- hzhzbr, it’s flipping cold- would m-m-make the point moot!”

It was pretty cold, Roland admitted. The wind that blew through the Coldera stung at his face. Tani jumped a few times, presumably trying to warm herself with some exercise. “So where did Nerea-” A sharp but muffled cough from Leander. “Queen Nerea.” “Queen Nerea find the information about Mornstar anyway?” “She must have retrieved it from the archives. Hydropolis may have only been around for some centuries, but she has mentioned her bloodline runs much further back.”

A rumble from ahead made them look up; Evan had probably spoken the words indicated on the plaque, since now a stone shrine had appeared where there was only ice before. “I’m flippin’ cold, mun.” Lofty repeated, and Roland smiled mildly before picking up the Kingmaker and joining the group in front of the entrance. “Well, let’s just see what kind of trial is there...”

“...or not.” The Kingmaker quipped as they stepped into a room of crumbled pillars and charred craters in the walls. A pile of rust-red metal laid behind what Roland could make out to be a former altar. “Someone got here before us!” Bracken hurried to inspect the wreckage as she spoke. “If it was Naverre, then it’s entirely possible, what we’ve gathered about Mornstar is that it’s a treasure of Allegoria, as king he can always drop by and-.” “Let’s slow down a little!” Evan cut in. “There’s got to be something we can salvage.”

The group spread out. Tani blew dust off the altar and looked up. A stained glass panel in the middle of the ceiling- was that the color of a morning sky? “Well, look on the good side- they never specified Mornstar countered things like the Horned One, right? Only darkness. So what if normal light spells can do the same thing?” “It might take a vast amount of light spells to even scratch something the size of the Horned One.” Leander inspected the altar. “Not to say the monsters that could disrupt the casting. Our sole advantage right now is the Declaration and the people that have gathered under the banner; we need all the help we can get.”

A glow out from the corner of his eye- Roland turned to look. From the golem? He put down Lofty, prompting a huffed “Oi!” in response. “Well, I don’t think we’ll be deciphering this any soon, but hey,” Bracken said, “look here.” It was odd, but the rust-red artifact almost looked like those they saw occasionally in the wild… “A dragon, and... a star?” Evan said. “Do you think
they’re referring to the same tale that we read about?” “But that doesn’t look like towers- they look like...” Tani answered, “Individual things? Like that golem in the corner?”

Roland looked between the golem and the group surrounding the altar. Lofty waddled to the metal, oddly serious. “And with that... Is it me or have we seen this before, pops?” Tani added. “The scraps we dug from the caves at Cloudcoill?” Ruffles of fabric as Batu scratched at his bandana. “Aye, lassie- I’ve seen those.” “That’s odd.” Leander added- they were surrounding the wreckage now. “We’d had similar constructs wash up on Hydropolis’ shores before. We were lucky the sea rendered them too rusty to fight properly.” Roland placed a hand on the red metal and turning around to look at Leander. A hiss. “So you’re saying these are-”

“a disaster waiting to happen.”

He swept a hand over the altar- a dragon and a star-like figure, surrounded by smaller engravings of people and machines. The rust-red golem stood stationary behind the altar. A ghost in plain armor and a helmet sat cross-legged to the side. “In time, either the Kingmaker or the King loses their control, and thus the kingdom is doomed. I’ve seen it happen even before the calamity, up close. My home. A miasma that feeds and feeds on people’s emotions and flaws, warps their desires. Nothing good can come of it- nothing has.”

“This is why you refused to let the Kingsbond be forged over Mornstar.” “The other kingdoms may use whatever artifacts they salvaged from the elite automatons, but I... can’t. I refuse. I may have been tempered by the years I have been here... How long was it, Kingmaker Doloran?” “Since...?” “The Break.” “Two hundred and eight years.” “They say I was irrational. Tied up over losing my home. But even now I cannot shake that belief. That your k- your ancestors caused it.” The ghost rested his head on his arms. “It was so direful that Allegoria was built in the skies just so its people did not have to see the scars laid on the land... and now you are here to threaten this kingdom of peace.” A drip of water echoed in the far corner of the shrine. The ghost looked up.

The cracks in the sky closed. “Ah... so Allegoria has fallen. The little king was not enough, in the end...”

“I do not want to blame them for wanting a sense of normalcy, but I hope you, who was not there during the Break and sneaked here against your king’s advice, will have ears to know what will happen.” Silence fell in the shrine. Doloran stared at the etchings, measuring his words carefully. “I can understand your concerns, but I’m afraid I can’t accept what you proposed about our work. We’ve improved- the past Kingmakers were all animals-” He did a double-take. Not the right word, not quite- “…simp- simpler minds, you know.” He was not measuring them well. Doloran scrambled for words. “I’ll... uh. I’ll make sure Allegoria stays prosperous.” That, he was genuine about. “Whatever it takes.”

Green embers and a blurring sensation. “The last of the world I knew, gone... my siblings in arms... I’m coming.”

The ghost stared at him for long enough to feel uncomfortable, then issued a whistling, long sigh. “And... uh, I’m sure I would’ve figured a way out by then. I would know-”

A child with blue hair, wielding a sword with a yellow blade. “Why can’t you respond? I brought it. The sword marking the Kingsbond.” Purple miasma gathered around him, almost like a cocoon. “Or have you decided to forget about Allegoria like everyone else? Why have they forgotten?” The cocoon crackled, as if at bursting point.

“Answer me!”
Roland blinked, reorienting himself to the sight of a ruined shrine. It seemed, from the chill the back of his head was feeling, that he was propped up against the wall. Next to him on the ground was a sixth senser. Other than that… “Oi.” Roland turned to see Batu leaning against the wall next to him, having rested his elbows on his axe. Ah, right. He must’ve fallen over or something similar. Roland kneaded his forehead before responding. “…sorry.” Most important of all- “Mornstar?”

"We figured it out when you started billowing black smoke and toppled over.” Tani said, drawing the two’s attention. The golem was now- was it at the opposite side of the shrine? And it seemed a lot more… frosted over than before… Bracken seemed to have torn a piece of the red metal off and was inspecting it. Evan and Leander stood near the altar, the former holding a silver cup adorned with green decorations and the latter looking between it and Roland, holding a wand. Roland smiled, a bit guiltily before standing up with a pull from Batu.

“It might be too late to give a warning as such…” Leander said, pushing up his glasses and walking over. “But it should be best for you to exercise caution around anything related to magic from now on.” Roland gave a embarrassed smile in response. “Hey, at least we know Mornstar does work on the Horned One now, right?” “…well. Yes, I suppose that query has been settled, but no more endeavours, I hope.” “A’ight.”

“Then maybe we should return to Evermore.” Evan said. “The sooner we can begin our preparations against the Horned One, the better we can coordinate with the other nations.” Lofty grumbled something akin to ‘cold feet’ next to him. Roland squeezed his eyes shut and exhaled; a pat on the back of his head. He might have to bring this up sooner or later- once they were beginning to have sorted things out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 96! I'm back from school... although I'll have school stuff to sort out next week again. I'll try to post one more chapter tomorrow, then there'll be another 2-week hiatus. I'll try to finish this exact fic before summer ends this year.

In the 1 year hiatus I literally worked on... 5, 6 versions of this chapter and eventually decided to have Roland take one for the team so I can smush the 3 versions into one. Especially with the amount of magical items there can be, I wanted to just get the doubt about this iteration of Mornstar working out of the picture. If you saw my posts about the abundance of Mornstar and this game's Mornstar the cup being only an magic item named after the spell I thought I'd take it all the way and make it basically the battery for the high-grade golems. They go three times as fast as the plain versions you see on the field.

Just for reference, I've read up... most of the Blackhart DLC lore and just a tiny tidbit of the Memory Lane DLC lore so the lore here is partially based on what I know... I guess. Although about the memory lane lore I only know Doloran didn't have a lot of charisma so I tried to stuff it in here sdlkfs

Last I fought the golem in game Leander pretty much cheesed the whole boss fight by the Boreal Needle spell(or so I remembered) so I had to.
“I think we have a slight problem.” Nu Bi commented as he, the other armor makers and the Evermore crew stood around the armory forge. “The item that King Evan forged his Kingsbond over… it is wood, was it not?” Evan took out the Royal Twig, pointed it forward and stared at it for a second. “Well… yes.” “Should we…” The dogfolk nudged at the forge, in which Mornstar glowed gently- despite the screens next to it indicating pretty extreme temperatures. “Should I be worried?”

They all stared at the forge for a while. Then Lofty hopped onto the table. “Well, if the flippin’ old stick’s gonna go up in flames, it ain’t gonna mean the Kingsbond is gone, right? Flip, mun, we can just re-stick the bond to some other weapon an’ throw it in there. Right, Evan lad?” “I suppo-”

“There we go. I can’t wait till I get something that ain’t a flippin’ stick.” Nu Bi tilted his head. “You’re sure?” “Sure as sure, mun.” Bracken raised her arm to interject. “Well, we can always recon-”

Nu Bi took the twig, opened the forge- sending a blast of hot air through the room, chucked the twig accurately into the cup and closed it. The twig promptly went up in flames. Bob screeched and flew out of the armory. The group stared inside the forge as the burning twig toppled out of sight.

Silently Bracken walked over to the screens, moved something, and then kept staring. And-

“Oh, okay, it’s happening- okay, get out,” The First Lady of Tech promptly started ushering the crew out of the armory. “This is a work-only environment, clear out.” With them outside, Bracken turned back, stretching out her arms.”Alright, folks! Let’s crack down this son of a-” The bang of the armory doors cut her off. Lofty whistled. “They’ve got it, I’m guessin’.” Batu said. “Best if I go get them scurvy dogs in proper fightin’ spirit if Tani hadn’t already.” “Then I should start drafting an approach to our faceoff with the Horned One.” Leander added. “We-”

“LEANER!” Bracken yelled, poking her head out from behind the armory door. “WE NEED YOU FOR- ah, alright, you’re still here. We need some magic-related consultation, get in here.” “I’ll handle the plan formation.” Evan quickly said. Leander nodded, did an ok gesture at the rest of the crew and followed Bracken inside the armory.

“We’ll need… Gao Jia, Lycorias-” “All the tacticians your commander of, basically.” Lofty cut in, and Evan nodded. “Yes. Roland, let’s go.” “Roger that.”

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“Min Ti sent me to tell you Bai Gon’s lecturing the army- they’ll all be here soon.” Evan nodded at the guide, who flashed a toothy grin and added. “Knowing him, he’s still got… give it fifteen or twenty minutes, I would say.”

Roland looked up from the sketch he had done- four towers surrounding the Horned One, or rather, four not-round circles surrounding a larger, just as scribbly one. “Twen- excuse me, how?” He was aware that Bai Gon liked to talk about how a true soldier acted, back in his day, but that was stretching it... “When he finds the event as formal, he tends to pause for a few seconds between every line.” The scout shrugged. “He thinks people will pay more attention if he does that. At least it gets people nodding. Anyway, I’ll just get back- he’s going to repeat all of that to me if I don’t.”
As the scout jogged back out of the conference room, Evan glanced at the Leafbook he had set on the table. “Queen Nerea says their navy forces are on their way… hopefully it’s a safe journey. Their path’s the closest to the Horned One, after all.” “Their navy’s the pride of their nation, yer ornery worrying over nothin’. Av a lil faith.” Lofty responded, and the room lapsed into silence for a while. “Roland.” Evan looked up. “I doubt if you would be happy to hear it, but I… we’re going to have to fight the Horned One head on. Are you sure about coming with us?”

He wanted to say yes, really, but… “No.” There was no point in pretending anything was fine. “I’m not sure at all- I conked out twice in two days. But what choice do I- no, what choice do we have? The world’s about to end, might as well go in guns ablaze.” Evan almost smiled, but the frown he held did not disappear. “Plus,” Roland added, “My soulmate caused all this mess, I’m basically at fault by association.” The frown was even worse now- “It’s still the truth, but that’s not the focus.”

Evan’s disapproving look turned to one of curiosity. “Let’s go over this again… Naverre probably has an idea that I’m Doloran’s soulmate- he probably did much further back, when we were still working out Hydropolis’ crisis.” Roland recounted. “Which means there’s still a possibility of negotiation if we convince him of the fact that releasing the Horned One, for whatever purpose, is bad. With me as an example.” He tapped on the table. “Which means I have to hold on until we get there.” Just a while longer. “And I have to be there to be the negotiation chip- or maybe even some kind of reverse hostage if Doloran’s the only other aspect of Allegoria that actually exists.”

“That makes sense…” Evan muttered. “But Leander says you can’t use magic. If that means you can’t use the arms band, then-” “I’ve asked Li Li if she can do something about it. I’ll be borrowing a lot of weapons if that doesn’t work. And at the very least…” Roland thought. “I still have the pistol from the other world. Might take some work to make the bullets, but that’s plan c. We still have to figure out our approach to face the Horned One first.”

A huff as Lofty sat down on the table. “Always the strategist, eh, Roland? For all I know, your mind’s gonna be the last to go-” “Lofty!” Evan interrupted. Roland shrugged, scritched a few smaller circles- the fake Kingmakers- and carefully placed the pencil on the table. The towers, defended by fake Kingmakers. Chances were if they were felled, they would simply be regenerated… “Why, it’s a tidy thing that happens! As long as they keep each other’s heads in the game, we ain’t all gonna drop soulless yet.” “How’s that?” Roland asked, considering the chances of defeating all four fakes at once.

Lofty plodded circles around the desk. “Now, let’s see… you know now the Horned One is the source of power for Dolly-boy. Something that can fill t’ world with nasty purple fug before anyone can say ‘flippin’ heck’. Now, why haven’t we all gone ‘flippin’ heck’ yet?” The Kingmaker stopped. “Because the fug’s all cooped up in rock, that’s how.” The two looked up as Lofty nodded. “Yuer king of Allegoria’s all wanting to release it, so the other candidate for that is-” “My dear old soulmate.” That seemed to get involved in everything. Roland sighed quietly, then realised it was a chance to start getting something out of Lofty. “So what about you? You don’t have an origin that involves nasty purple fug?”

“No! No way, any well-balanced folk would think better than to fix yourself with that kinda business.” Roland stared. “So how are you a Kingmaker?” Lofty paused, then hopped once. “Well, y’know- yikes, I’ve got to go over this entirely, en’t it? Alright, gather around, kids, we’ve got a tale to yip. How do I start… right.” The Kingmaker turned around.

“If we had to go back- way, way back, then we can blame it on a crybaby.”

Chapter End Notes
Is it too late to start throwing references around for the first game? Probably.

Thank you for reading chapter 97! A bit of comic relief before I start going into full AU territory. Took it down the first time for a bit of minor word tweaking, but it's more so that I can refer between chapters and make sure everything still makes sense when we take the drifting into another level. I hope it does, anyway...
A lofty tale

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“At least that’s what my seniors liked to joke- ol’ ma would chew me out for givin’ lip like that. It was way long ago, when one of us faeries, a master comedian ended up fixin’ a world-ending problem. He went on to further travels, but where we lived?” Lofty grimaced. “Tourists. Tourists happened, and even our best comedians couldn’t deal with the stress. They got ol’ ma to settle us somewhere we wouldn’t get pestered in the end.”

Lofty must’ve caught on to the incredulous stares Evan and Roland had, since he quickly paused. “Excuse me, did you say fairy?” Roland asked first. “You know about those too, Roland?” Evan added, and Roland frowned. “Well, not quite. We just have a few terms that uses that term- fairy tales, for example.” “Oh, that’s because we used to be able to travel between worlds if the conditions require it. But then Gateway or didn’t work anymore… ah well. Anyway, we were a picky lot: didn’t want tourists, didn’t want to just make inside jokes to the same old folks either. Too long-livin’ to find them funny, and too tiring to make some new ones. So eventually that lot o’ us went to be adventurers around the world, and that includes me. I went, and went, and then-”

The Kingmaker threw up his hands. “Out comes from the trees this giant monster, wafting purple smoke like they were some failed attempt at cooking! To my dismay, I geared up as a traveller, not a warrior. So there I was cowering for my life, and then bam!” A clap. “Now there was this giant monster, wafting black smoke like some overcooked barbecue, and now also out from the trees comes this wizard, an imp and a wyrm. Familiars, I’m guessing.”

“Familiars?” Evan asked. “Higgledies except you can actively summon from your strength. You won’t see those- something happened while we were hiding away from visitors. The wizard stopped in front of me- what were their names…” “We still haven’t gotten to the part about being a Kingmaker yet.” Roland gently reminded. “I’m getting there! Jeepers, mun.” Lofty continued. “Long story short, wyrm wanted to eat me, imp said no, I got food and shelter for quite a few years and went around doing comedy performances. The three saw some of mine, but they were always busy. Planning something in some language I didn’t understand.”

“But then one day the wizard came over.” Lofty let his voice go lower. ‘Let me try something.’ They said, and flicked my head. I was annoyed, but they were mighty pleased. ‘Well, consider it my blessing. I have something important to do. My companions will take care of you.’ They said. We never saw them since.”

Evan’s tail flicked once as Lofty continued. “I couldn’t refuse the hospitality. I used the place as a base for… a few centuries. Realised I could turn into a dragon during then, travelled around to give jokes, people came to challenge the familiars, but they began to act weird.” A pause. “Like some sort of fey mood. The wyrm eventually didn’t come back either.”

“A few more days passed, and the imp told me that she had to stop her brother. She flew off real quick, but I’ve been living with them long enough to have to do something to help, right? So I flew after them as fast as I could.” The humor from earlier wasn’t as pronounced. “I might be a small, stubbly thing now, but I was geared out to be a traveller, y’know. By the time I got there, a few days later, right where grassland met desert, there was all these armies and golems and what I later learned to be Kingmakers fighting against monsters- even a large plane or somethin’, and then in the front was the wyrm and the imp facing off.”
“That’s…” Evan muttered. “That’s the plaque we saw in the shrine, wasn’t it?” The Break. “Yep. ‘Flip, mun,’ I said when I got there. ‘What kinda family feud do you have here?’” Lofty said. “The imp looked at me, and at the exact same time, the wyrm opened its mouth and a laser beam came out, and the imp tried to put up a barrier. There was this really bright light, and when I could open my eyes, I was home.”

“That’s…” Evan muttered. “That’s the plaque we saw in the shrine, wasn’t it?” The Break. “Yep. ‘Flip, mun,’ I said when I got there. ‘What kinda family feud do you have here?’” Lofty said. “The imp looked at me, and at the exact same time, the wyrm opened its mouth and a laser beam came out, and the imp tried to put up a barrier. There was this really bright light, and when I could open my eyes, I was home.”

“Old ma told me that something terrible had happened outside, she was lucky to have gotten us all back in time and all of us shouldn’t leave from now on.” Lofty shrugged. “Well, I ain’t just sit there and pretend everything’s alright! So I waited for a while, then snuck out the first chance I got.” A pause. “All the places were scrambled, for starters- and when I asked around, barely fifty years had passed since the war, and only recently the continents had stopped moving. The wyrm was sealed away, and the imp had vanished. And then if things decided they should get worse, they bloody did- I figured there wasn’t a way home.

“In that soul-changing moment, I thought, I wanted to be stronger. Like those creatures I saw. Asking around guided me to a cape… east of Cloudcoil, I think.” Lofty plodded on the table. “The thing I remembered best was the field of messily grown brown flowers and the Higgledies watering them. And there was this really old lady on a rocking chair, this simple-lookin’ metal sword hanging on it.”

“‘I wanna be a Kingmaker.’ I said.” Lofty went up an octave. “‘Why?’ ‘She asked. ‘I want to be stronger.’ I replied. ‘Where are the others?’ ‘They devoted themselves to trying to make themselves Kingmakers in the Drylands, a sea away from here. Some succeeded, others didn’t. Is there no other way?’ ‘No.’ I said.”

“She looked at me and said, ‘Do you know what happens if something goes wrong when making a Kingmaker? Even in our childhood, before the rumors spread, we were taught that Kingmakers are made by fusing a soul with a great power from the magical realm. A slight misstep will cause you to be lost in-between.’” That was what Lofty said before, Roland realised. “I said, I wanted to be stronger, flippin’ heck the risks.

“We debated, about strength, morals, all that. And when we finally exhausted our points, the sun was already setting. ‘Tell me your name.’ She said, and I did. ‘On one condition.’ She said. ‘I will not summon the great power. I have neither the strength nor the will to do so.’ ‘But, but,’ I said, ‘Isn’t that the point of the Kingmaker?’ She smiled and said, ‘You need not worry. You hold great strength yourself. Not like those we summon, but strong all the same. All I need to do is to introduce you into the system.’ Something like that.”

“So basically you used an entirely different power source.” Roland concluded. “That’s right, mun.” Lofty hopped. “Anyway, it took a day or two, and a magical wall blocked the cave- mighty mage, she was. I remembered I hadn’t known her name, so when all was said and done and I was standing on top of a glowy rune, I asked her about it. Alisandra, she said. I remember it clear as day. I owe her that.”

There was something about that name- maybe it sounded a bit like Lissa. “Does this mean you’ve been a Kingmaker of some other nations before?” Evan asked. “Aw, pssh, naw.” Lofty grumbled for a while before speaking up. “I snoozed for so long I lost my touch on the whole dragon-becoming shijimajig. Got summoned six times, by six different people and got politely told, naw, I’m no mighty enough, they’ll go do the trial again.” Roland grinned. “You know, we could’ve entertained-”

“IS KING EVAN IN? THE MIGHTY ZIP AND THE ZIPPEL-” A roll of the syllable, crackling slightly from being spoken from a loudspeaker. “-LIN HAS ARRIVED!” Evan looked
up. “That’s-” “Don’t leave me hanging, come on! I’ve got some big intel for you!”

Chapter End Notes

At first I wanted to post one per day but then I started worrying if last chapter was rushing things too much and now I'm posting two at a time. Probably will do the same for the rest? Let's see.

Thank you for Chapter 98! Suddenly we go into lore and although I'd love to keep giving details school is around the corner and then I'd be too stressed to write again. So maybe next holiday, Anyway Alisandra finally gets a hand in the story and although she's been bumped aside by Doloran being born too early she is still relevant, I hope..... and Lofty. Yeah. It took me a while to piece things together for him, but that's the direction I went in in the end.
Drafts and tactics

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You built a new aircraft?” Evan asked as he accompanied Zip and a few other Broadleafers to the conference room. “Yep! It’s the Zippelin- two L’s since it’s the second coming of the mighty plane.” And the second coming of the golden Zip face-cannon, Roland groaned inwardly. The Broadleaf president waved at Roland. “You look even worse than when I first saw you, buddy.” “Just the usual existential crisis.” Roland gave a wry smile. “You mentioned intel?”

“Yeah, intel.” Zip set down a Leafbook. “My main forces are still on the way, so I thought might as well check around the new continent.” “Wait- you went there?” Evan asked, alarmed. “Yeah! We’ve got the fastest aircraft, I thought I might as well go check it out.” A hologram of the continent, mountain and all, blinked into sight above the Leafbook, and Roland quietly pushed away the sketch he had tried to make earlier. “Well, we hovered around it and sent in drones to help scout things out for us, really, so we never caught the attention of the murky things.”

One of the Kingmakers flew off the tower- Longfang, judging by the red light on top of the tower. A click, and the colors on the hologram shifted to reds and oranges- resembling the infrared screens Roland had seen from the weather reports. “Magic concentration of the place.” Zip explained and paused the playback. “See anything peculiar?”

Someone knocked on the door: Lycorias, who after a quick round of greetings, joined in. For a moment, it was… all oranges and red. “About the Kingfaker, I mean.” Zip quickly added, and Roland stifled a snort at the nickname before focusing again. “It… looks like a leash.” Evan commented. Just as he said, a line of red stretched from the tower to the flying shape. “Perhaps the tower is the lifeline of those creatures as well as what keeps up the barrier.”

That meant it was exactly like Evan’s tale about the evil dragon: they had to take down the towers before they even had a chance to defeat the Horned One. The one next to them pursed his lips. “There’s a problem, though.” One of the engineers said, fiddling with the Leafbook. “If the tower is a conduit of magic, then it would be able to store a lot of it- it’s awfully possible that it can stand up to magical artillery, even absorb it.” “Then try cannonballs.”

“Gao Jia- Bai Gon, too!” Evan stood up. “At peace.” Gao Jia said. “I suppose your arsenal is mostly magic, yes, President Vector?” “Ah, our best weapons are magic, if that’s what you mean. We still got the stray bullets and bolts, but they won’t be enough to get a tower down, much less four. Licorice?” The Hydropolitan gave a disapproving frown before shaking her head. “The only weapons that fit your criteria are harpoons, and I would better assume that they would break before a cornerstone can be as much as chipped.” “Anything that helps.” Evan answered. “I’ll send a message along.”

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“The moderator’s compiled a list of our armies’ respective strengths and weaknesses and sent it out. It’s encrypted, but let’s hope the king of Allegoria doesn’t know how to hack…” Zip looked up. “But run this by me again, why can’t we just each work on our own? This whole ‘keeping the pace even’ thing is-.”

“The faster the gunners reach their destination,” Roland said, gesturing at the hologram- after some magnifying, it seemed that there was a clear route up to each of the towers- but the end of the line
was right in the open, “the faster it becomes a siege- a siege in enemy territory, no less. Having different groups together makes things less of a breeze, so they won’t go over their heads and make it there too quick.” “We also need to get as near as where the Horned One is as we can;” Evan added, “If we can’t be there before the towers get taken down together, we’ll lose our initiative. We have to take down the towers and then disable the Horned One in one push, or else the cost to our numbers and stamina would be too big.”

“And after that?” One of the Broadleaf mechanics who stayed blurted- the rest of the people had returned to their posts, the first draft of the plan having taken shape. “You fly in and you expect the king to be there?” Zip frowned. “Mike-” “And what about us?” The mechanic continued, spreading his arms wide. “Are we supposed to just be there and, what, fight stuff?” “We’ll have the wounded retreat to Evermore through the two Zippelins in the very least.” Evan answered firmly. “In the event that-” “It’s- it’s not going to work. It’s not…”

The Broadleafer stared at the table, hands curled into fists. Zip stared, then knocked on the table once. “Alright, you’re on break. Go outside, find something to help with for a while.” “But-” “You know the rules, Mike.” Mike’s frown deepened, but he nodded, trodding out of the room. They watched as the door closed, then Evan frowned. “Is he alright?” “Not really.” Zip answered. “His mother was one of the victims. He insisted on coming along, and since we’ve got ward bots keeping watch, I doubted staying in Broadleaf would help either. Only saving grace is that with how more people means stronger Kingsbond for Naverre, the stolen souls are gonna be okay for now. Yeah… actually, that’s another thing we’ve got to watch out for.”

“Fragile morale.” Roland drummed on the table. “We’ve had a few successes with Evermore’s armies-” The skirmishes against Tyran and other occasional monster-related invasions, for example. “-but it is the first time we’re all working together on such a large scale.” Zip nodded, adding, “Can’t believe our first opponent is something like that.” “But that’s what our Declaration was for in the first place, right?” Evan said. “It’ll all come together. We have to make it happen.” Exactly something he would say.

They turned back to discuss the hologram, then Evan tilted his head. “But Mike has a point. How can we be sure Naverre can be found when we go in the large crack? You were the one to suggest it, Lofty.” “Ah, posh, mun.” Lofty sniffed. “Villains always do that, eh? Just have some kind of road straight to their lair. You’d think they have a red carpet rolled out for ya with their sort of planning.” “...well, you’re not wrong…” Evan began, a small smile forming on his face that quickly vanished in his serious expresion. “Let’s see what else we can work out.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 99! Again, it's a bit of pacing for what comes next, so not much that I can say here haha.
The week or so that passed were thankfully uneventful. As more troops and officials reached Evermore, tents and boxes of supplies dotted the plains near the stone walls. With how most of the soldiers sparred with each other, the meetings moved outdoors as more details of the operation to end the Horned One’s threat- Operation Hornfall, they called it- came together and the groups began to be assigned to each of the four cardinal points of the continent.

The day when the first phase of Mornstar was finished was not. Right as they were readying to wrap up the afternoon meeting, their concluding statements had been punctuated by a loud crash outside the building. They had hurried out, weapons in hand and fearing some kind of invasion, but were quickly stopped by the sight of Lofty, in his dragon form, coiling in the afternoon skies just above the cookshop, now lacking a roof. A crowd stood in a circle as Lofty triumphantly shook small pieces of wood off of himself. Further on the edge of the crowd, Floyd dropped the handles of a food-filled cart and started doing a nervous tap dance.

“I! AM! LIVING!” The Kingmaker boomed as the rubble sent a cloud of dust poofing upwards from what used to be the cookshop.

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“...and so Tyger and Ah Chu took charge of the sword’s tempering.” Bracken concluded as the clock chimed six. “The rest of us couldn’t help much, it being technical and skill-based stuff and all, but I left a manual for the forge’s auto-functions if they needed it. The others have gone to catch some shuteye. Is Lofty still outside?” As if on cue, an echoing yodel could be heard from outside the castle. “Yep, there he is. Doubt Floyd’s going to let him near the cookshop in a long while. If he manages to knock down the cookshop again, I’ll be getting that ban on him...”

“But what about you, Bracken?” Evan asked. “You’ve been up for a while.” And in the contrary, Bracken didn’t look like she had done a few all-nighters at all. “Oh, no worries about that. We in the armory created this brew-” Leander visibly shuddered. “-by accident, really, but we put together coffee, hot-tip and rocket fuel syrup, and now it’s the perfect blend of taste and caffeine! If we can recreate it, then we can totally market it! How does Quack-a-trio sound for a name?” Bracken grinned after looking at the rest of the crew who bore expressions with various degrees of fear. “I’m kidding, we had sleep shifts.” “But they did make it.” Leander whispered to the side.

“A time for celebration!” Lofty suddenly boomed, pressing the side of his face against the castle entrance. What could only be the door frame cracked. “A time for parties! Finally, something that befits a-” “Lofty.” Evan warned, and the Kingmaker cackled before flying past the castle, leaving the doorway empty. “No signs of the sugar- ahem, power rush ending, huh.” Roland commented. Tani rubbed her nose before saying, “I don’t see why not. We’re so much closer to our goal now! We sky pirates would’ve set up a few roasts and kegs already.”

Evan shuffled uncomfortably. “But… isn’t that inconsiderate for the other nations? They’ve…” “I mean, yeah, but you’ve got to let people here stretch out a little.” Tani answered. “You don’t see us not celebrating over victories because wyverns are still breathing down our backs back in Cloudcoil.” She half-hopped towards the entrance before turning around. “We know exactly how much mood to make, don’t worry. And I’ll be there in case some don’t!” Evan glanced around a bit more before finally turning to Roland, who couldn’t help but chuckle. “Just don’t forget your
bedtime.” Tani cheered. “Nice! I’ll get Pops! Come on, Evan!”

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“You told me that you would want to start adapting to Evermore’s lifestyles.” Leander commented as Bracken sat down at the table they were at. Further away, a bonfire lit up the night. She shrugged. “I want to, but… it’s a bit hard, y’know?”

Roland looked up from the Leafbook, where he was drafting a reply to a post that worried that the fiends would attack the other nations. (Zip’s scouting showed that they were concentrated defensively around the Horned One, and if they attacked, it would take a few days before they descended on the others, giving time for preparation or evacuation… although, he thought, maybe it would cause alarm with the wording.) Bracken sipped on a cup before leaning back. “We travel around a lot on business. From Goldpaw, to Hydropolis, to DDD- Ding Dong Dell, I mean. We might befriend people, sure, but in the end, it’s just work. Nothing to delve into.” She gestured with her cup. “Easy to fall on old habits.” “Will you be heading back to Broadleaf after all this, then?” Roland asked. Bracken squinted. “Well, with tripdoors and all that, I don’t think it would matter.”

They watched as Pugnaciue swept a sky pirate off their feet in their spar, cheers and laughs rising. Tani stepped up to challenge Pugnaciue, and the two did a bow before taking the wooden poles in hand. Roland turned to look at Evan, who had been sitting at a separate table, deep in thought. They had talked earlier; the young king mentioned his goals during then.

“I don’t want to put him down like one would a skeleplasm.” Evan had said. “We might have to deal with the Horned One anyway, but if we can get him to help us… is it wishful thinking?” It was, Roland admitted, but he agreed with the first part of the statement. “How are you going to bring that about?” Evan thought for a moment before he answered. “I’ll have to think. Something that he can relate to…”

“Raincloud alert.” Bracken suddenly said. As the two consuls looked up, she took a swig. “Both the introspective sort?” “Not quite.” Leander answered. “It’s just something we’ve gotten used to, I suppose.” “Ah. Ah, yeah.” They sat for a while more, and then Bracken stood up. “Well, I might as well test myself on the art of brawling. Can’t let my skills rust too much.” Maybe the silence was getting awkward. “It’s alright if you stay-” Roland began, but she shook her head. “Nah, it’s fine. Just got a bit of caffeine to work out of my system.”

It was quiet for a while, then Leander spoke. “Hydropolis’ forces have reached Capstan.” “Means they’ll be arriving soon, huh.” Ding Dong Dell’s ships had to take the long route south, then around Capstan, the place being landlocked; Broadleaf’s had sent a message that they had passed the rifts and were approaching from the north. Roland looked up. “How are you doing? You pulled a few all-nighters.” “They were telling the truth about sleep shifts; no need to worry.” “Alright.”

A whistle came from the direction of the bonfire; the round was deemed a draw. Roland caught a yell of ‘Ye were goin’ easy on ‘im, Miss Tani!’. “Have you gone abroad on work while you were being president, Roland?” Leander suddenly asked. “Well, yeah, why?” “Do you think I have to prepare a speech when they land?” “Trying to impress Nerea?” “No- I simply thought it would be impolite to greet them empty-handed.” Leander let out a whistling sigh. “I am to be Hydropolis’ king after all.”

Ah. “It was somewhat mandatory for us.” Roland recounted. “Usually for formal diplomacies where we had points to make.” Which was pretty often. “But I think we can leave formalities for later in this situation.” “But I could try,” Leander insisted. “I have to start getting ready.”

It sounded like the rush to get something done after a bout of procrastination, oddly. “Get too
wound up with the details, and you lose sight of the big picture- that’s what I got told all the time, anyway.” Roland said. “It won’t hurt to train, but in the short term, just… do what you usually do. Archon means just about the same as king,” “Archon means ruler, not king, Roland.” “The word monarch came from archon, and monarch means king.” Roland gestured. “So-” “You said it came from archon; yet that does not mean archon has the same meaning as king! The right term for that is basileus!” Leander pushed up his glasses and pondered for a while. “…but they both bear duties of ruling over places, indeed. I'll admit that.” “And there’s nothing stopping you from doing the exact same thing for both.” “Indeed…”

They sat for a while. “Nerea had managed Hydropolis’ affairs for long enough, and here I am, arguing over definitions of words and dragging my feet over the matter.” Leander said. “Not to mention Evan, who’s been stellar at being king despite- or because of his age.” A pause. “It felt easier to work discreetly- as archon or consul, or otherwise.” Roland nodded, and they watched as Pugnacius nimbly hopped over a sweep of the lance from Tani. “Hear me out, though; you’ve got a good head-start. The rest will come naturally.” “Mm-hmm.”

Lofty suddenly flew down towards the bonfire, scattering a few of the audience. “Why do I sound like a grandpa trying to give someone advice?” Roland half-mused, half-joked. “I'm older than you.” Leander reminded him. Roland grinned. “In the chronological sense, yes.” “Are we starting an argument on who’s senior now?” “Haha, no.” Because in the end, you would be the eldest- The Kingmaker roared out a laugh as one of the soldiers yelled at him. “Only if you want to.”

After all, they hadn’t sat like that in a while. It was nice.

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The celebrations took only an hour or so before Lofty shrunk mid-air and landed with some bouncing. With the partying concluded, the citizens returned to their posts- the clanging of metal continued late into the night. It was rumored that there was a minor argument of humility on who should present Mornstar among the crew of blacksmiths, but as Bracken stepped into the throne room, followed by the blacksmiths and holding the red cushion with Mornstar resting on it, proud smiles beamed on their faces.

Mornstar- an intricate silver sword, with green decorations in the hilt that reflected the morning sunlight from the windows as Evan raised it. No, in the sunlight, it was as though the sword itself was glowing gently, illuminating swirling dust.

“The Sword of Unity.” Evan breathed. The audience silently watched on, full of reverence. Normally, Mornstar looked somewhat too large, too clunky for someone his age, like something he should only wield once he had grown up, but yet, Roland thought, it wasn’t.

Mornstar, in Evan’s hands, looked just right.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 100! Whew. Since it'll be full of fights and stuff from next chapter onwards, I thought I might as well take this chance to try giving our folks some final bits of characterization and motivations.

I've never exactly included Bracken in the story, I'm aware of that, so I'm just gonna stretch it and say she still finds Evermore a bit like work and won't involve herself too
emotionally as a result. She's only been in Evermore for... two months? At most? I think. Also your consul pals, as usual.
“There are three phases to Operation Hornfall. Each and every part is crucial, so listen closely.”

It had been a while since Roland last spoke in front of a crowd, he realised. Soldiers of five nations stood in file in the golden plains; flags flew in the wind.

“The first phase is to take down the four towers surrounding the Horned One, using the cannons that will be manned by Goldpaw gunners.” The heavy metal ballistics had already been loaded onto the ships that were anchored on the shores. “To that end, you all have received two pieces of information: the map of the continent and the squadrons you have been assigned to. Once the gunners are in standby, the cannons and gunners must be protected. The nation leaders heading each of the squadrons are tasked with holding back the fake Kingmakers, and the rest of you either assist or fend against the monsters until all positions are ready. The optimal outcome is to eliminate the fakes so that the magic output to the rest of the towers are disrupted, but if the situation requires, keeping it back is also an option.” Roland nodded at Pugnacius, who nodded back from next to the Zippellin, where the nation leaders stood. “The Grand High Roller, Pugnacius, will lead the cannon shots.” He was aware of the murmurs. “Which means Team Red must double down on their efforts. Best of luck.”

“In the meanwhile, the Mornstar Squadron will be proceeding towards the Horned One to prepare for phase two: to disable the Horned One. Once phase two has begun, the four squadrons involved in phase one will flank the Horned One and assist. However, the attack with, and the defence of the cannons must be continued- our enemy is also made of rock. It is important that in this phase, the attack is maintained with moderation. Approach it like you would a siege.” And things would go similarly for their own squad; spread out the cannon sites to five spots and keep them guarded. He would be helping out on the ones further west.

And then comes the phase they- he was the most unsure about. “Once the Horned One is disabled, King Evan and a select crew will enter it, with the help of our Kingmaker.” Lofty hopped, although considering the audience, barely anyone saw him. No hesitation, now. Letting any of it slip would affect morale. “We have brought some explosives with us in case the path to the Allegorian King requires it.” It had to be the soul link that was causing the chill. “Our goal is to eliminate him and with it, end the threat of the Horned One.”

That was it, operation-wise. “This is the battle that determines the success of our Declaration- our banner of unity, and the fate of our world.” And in a sense, a second jurisdiction of the peace treaty of his. A proving of whether it could ever have worked. “Be careful, be helpful, and don’t lose hope.”

Thankfully, it didn’t seem like there would be an uproar. With the past week or so, everyone had the plan drilled into their heads- no minute details so they can focus on the big picture. No time, or place, for thinking about their differences. “Roland, may I?” At Evan’s request, Roland stepped back, letting the king take the loudspeaker as he stood next to the rest of the Evermore crew.

“I know all of you are scared. Your friends and family may have had their souls stolen, and— ” Evan put a hand at his chest. “I’m scared too. To speak the truth, ever since I was king, before being king, I have always been scared. What can I, a king, a kid, do? But now we are here, five nations as one, because of one thing.” Evan took a breath. “A promise.”
The soldiers listened quietly. “It was a promise to someone close to me, one that sought peace instead of vengeance.” Aranella. “A promise to give all my strength. A promise to persevere even though at times, I simply wanted to sit down and give up. And I know you all have made promises to your friends and family when you gathered here. So I implore you to make one more promise, to the comrades next to you, to each other who have gathered under our banner of peace, to everyone in this world: to promise to all work together!”

Evan’s eyes gleamed with determination. “It is promises that give us strength to walk towards a better future! To meet wonderful people who can walk that long road with us: all of you, all of us, footsteps as one! That’s why I ask now for you to make that promise, for the sake of our world!” He took a breath. “If we are united, we will make it!”

For a brief moment, the soldiers were silent. And then, a voice from the Hydropolitan army. “We fight!” As ripples do, the cheers grew louder, stronger, until the entire army was shouting as one.

“Evan lad’s come a long way.” Batu commented. Roland nodded. “...yeah.” A smile crept onto his face. Evan really had come a long way.

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“Yikes.” Lofty muttered yet again as the Zippelin began its descent. Jagged rocks and crevices glowed on continent and the Horned One itself. Around it, dark birds flew in tight, unnaturally symmetrical circles, their shapes barely visible against the sickly maroon skies. Tendril-like clouds stretched and wrapped around the continent, as if trapping the place in its own time.

“Something like that yanking my soul? No thanks!” The Kingmaker continued. Evan didn’t look away from the window. “You can’t get your soul stolen, Lofty.” “The squads are standing by.” Bracken reported from the Leafbook. “I’m a bit surprised there’s no reports of engaging the enemy so far.”

The Zippelin landed on a beach of rubble that crunched under their feet. Stray skeleplasms and fiends wandered some distance away, as though they did not acknowledge the crew’s existence. Bracken instructed Marly on something, most likely setting the aircraft’s defences. Roland stared, upwards, at the Horned One. Immovable and impassable: the black monstrosity that loomed, silent, smouldering flames that, given a spark- he shook his head and swallowed the thought. He was alright, he felt alright, given the amulet Li Li had made to take advantage of the abundance of magic on the continent. So he just had to, just- he had been fixated on the thought for a while now, he realised, but just for a while longer-

“Now, call me uninformed on this whole soulmate business,” Lofty suddenly said behind him, “But I’ve heard they contribute to each other.” “Contribute…?” “Yep. Emotions, destinies, that kind of crap.” Lofty waggled a finger at him. “You told all those soldiers not to lose hope, yeah? You better not do that either. There’s only so much of you that I can hold onto.” Before Roland could respond, the Kingmaker hopped back to Evan. “Och, Evan, you done yet?”

Right. Right... never mind that for now. They were about to be at war, never mind that. “Yes!” Evan said, prompting another jump from Lofty. “Then you better sound it, kiddo!” The king nodded, summoning Mormstar into his hand, the silver sword glowing and illuminating him and the ground around him. The Zippelin flew back into the skies, quickly obscured by the haze. Evan raised Mormstar.

“For the world!” “Flippity heck!” Lofty responded, glowing- from where he was, the dragon
Kingmaker flew upwards, trails of light following him as he faced the Horned One. He still was tiny compared to the colossus, but as Lofty roared, a low rumble shook the ground - the Horned One seemed to look up, straight at its match, and on the ground, the skeleplasms and fiends did so in unison.

Operation Hornfall had begun.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 101! Kinda decided to spin the speech that way because obviously the canon wanted to show how un-united they were but seriously? At that point of time? Is that the time to do that?

The operation itself might also be a bit different but the end goal is the same, I guess. Please look forward to it!
I really recommend putting on a bit of music for this chapter. My pick? Daredevil from Ace Combat 7.

Oh, merciful Oakenhart, I know I shouldn’t have skipped those swordfighting classes, but please, I tried so hard. My family is waiting for me. Jerome thought. Don’t let me die so early-

Instead of the sound of wind of a blunt weapon hurtling at his face, he heard two clangs of metal and the rumble as something collapsed. “Brother!” Jerome opened his eyes to a Hydropolitan soldier, who held his hand out and gestured around him. The masked wraith that was, just a few seconds ago about to decapitate him, was now just a wisp of black smoke. “You do not want to be left behind.” The monsters were just out of fighting distance- of course he would take that hand. “You owe my thanks.” Jerome said as he followed the soldier in a jog, back to where the main group, spearheaded by the Grand High Roller, was tussling with a group of smaller wraiths. “Tell me your name-”

His plea was cut short by the soldier stopping to parry a skeleplasm’s leaping slash, and just out of eyesight, a shadowy bird swooped towards the vulnerable companion. Almost on instinct, a dagger formed into his hand. Close combat may not be his forte, but this was! The grimalkin flung the short weapon straight into its prey, and as the latter dissipated into smoke, he summoned the dagger back into his hand. The soldier looked up, at Gerome, and then broke into a wide grin.

“It’s-” It sounded something like Ticky, at least; Gerome had learnt from the last week that Hydropolitans preferred complicated names. “Heard that.” He answered, returning to jogging pace. “Name’s Gerome, we really got to catch up with the others.”

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“How far are we from there?!” Roland heard someone shout from the front, and raised his gun to fire a bullet to repel one of the pursuing monsters. “I dunno, one fourth, one thirth!” Lofty responded from on top of one of the cannons. “Green glim incoming!”

They had formed a tight defence around the cannons, the metal contraptions having been fitted with automatic path seekers, as Zip called them, but the waves of monsters hadn’t stopped at all- “Porc incoming, 4 o’ clock!” Tani yelled, and two gunners stopped, kneeled; one of them aimed while the other helped steady the rifle. A slime crept too close for comfort- he focused and let a Flatliner fly, just in time to hear the rifle crack. The slime tumbled back from the two strikes, its body turning to dust. “Hoidy!” Lofty said, “Better start movin’, kids!”

The group hustled once more; something lit up the sky further away, piercing the dark haze. Something violet- Team Purple’s flare. They were already intercepting the Kingsfaker? Bracken grimaced and raised her hands, one reaching for the transmitter on her shirt: a blast of fire magic illuminated a few skeleplasms before incinerating them. Just as quickly, the haze covered it up. “Yoi, yoi, better hurry up! Get a move on!” Lofty shouted. “We’re behind schedule!” “Shut up, ye Higgledie!” A sky pirate huffed and quickened her pace.
Danger levels rising. High risk of untimely deactivation. Objective: warn President Vector. Alternative?

“Bastion, my old friend! Those colors don’t suit you at all!” President Vector shouted. None, BL-D31N deduced. Speech speed set to 100%. “President Vector! I detect a huge energy source! Reconsider the current strategy!”

The non-Bastion roared, and all audio input was distorted. “Well- certainly he’s a lot more upgraded than before.” President Vector uttered, adjusting his glasses. “But you know how it goes. Our enemy’s evolved? We out-evolve them!” He set down something- analysis: one drone. Logic not found. Risk of overheating increasing: opening vents. Reanalysing visual input: drones reforming, increasing in number. Multiple drones unfolding and rising. Updating status: airborne drones fitted with artillery, mechanism unknown. President Vector crossed his arms, the drones floating behind him, 100% exhilarated. In the air, Zippellin the 2nd opened up its main cannon. “The march of progress, baby!”

Searching vocabulary… “Oh, to hell with it.” BL-D31N expressed. Equipping weapons. SQUAD-1 rendezvous complete. SQUAD-1 armament complete. “On your orders, President!” President Vector took out his custom smartstick. “On my mark! Let’s get our folks as much time as they need! We can’t let those missiles of his even touch those cannons!”

Order received. Analysis of risk paused. Updating objective… defeat the non-Bastion!

“Your Majesty!” “Hurry! To Her Majesty!” “Do NOT!” Nerea ordered, the magical shield she had put up to fend against the ice beam dissipating, leaving behind a dome of frost. With a swipe of her staff, the dome shattered, and she took the chance to catapult the shards towards a few of the advancing fiends. “You must not forget what we should be protecting!”

Having fought against Brineskimmer at least twice by now, Nerea knew all too well about Brineskimmer’s long-range attacks- far away, the deep blue creature arched again, another blast of ice forming above it. But this was no Brineskimmer; this travesty was not the lax Kingmaker that would lazily sunbathe in the waters, Nerea knew that as well.

This was, Nerea thought as she raised her staff and shuddered as yet another beam crashed into the shield with the force of the very seas, this was a monstrosity. That now blocked their path and could very much shake up their plans simply because their long-range offences were not close enough. The first round of flares were already up- except theirs. Dread filled her stomach. Hydropolis had fought long and hard for its future; would she now be the one to damn the others’-

She lurched, and Brineskimmer’s attack turned abruptly to the left, freezing goos and fiends alike. What was- a sizzling sound very near her. Nerea broke the dome of ice again and focused. The fake Brineskimmer was snarling as it tried to swipe at something… the Zippelin, firing off something that burst into light on the guardian’s body. Another crackle, and then a voice. “Your Majesty! This is Marly of Zippelin the First speaking. Are you alright?” Nerea had almost forgotten about the transmitter, and she caught her breath before answering. “Yes!” She turned around to the soldiers. “Now’s our chance! Forward!”

No more of losing spirit. Nerea summoned a cascade of magic bolts and fired them into the air, the arrows falling in parabolic curves to pierce the monsters lurking in the shadows. If the creature was a fake, then they would set it right, and vanquish it once they got there. Let them come! She would
show them the wrath of a Hydropolitan.

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“Vector!” Mausinger shouted into the transmitter as he swatted aside a lashing vine. “How far are you on the Kingfaker beating?” “I don’t know! It looks pretty beat to me!” Oh, for the love of- “That’s not being helpful, Vector!” “Well, it ain’t down yet, but pretty close!” A blast from the other end of the line made the audio crackle. “Why’d you ask?”

He looked up at the fake Oakenhart, bombarded by a fresh round of fireballs, and fired a few more off. It almost felt like he’d gotten off lucky that fire was such a common element for magicians around the world to master. “You remember what you said about the reformation of the Kingmakers using energy, yes?” A screech of audio made him flinch before Vector came back online. “Didn’t catch you there, old buddy’s fired off some missiles again.” “We should take down the Kingfakers at the same time.” “Oh, you want to short out the magic circuits?”

He wasn’t exactly sure what Vector meant by that, but- he drew a line and slashed at it, riling up a line of fire that spread forward to intercept the spirals of branches that broke through the rock- one still grazed his leg, and one of the Dellian wizards hurried to cast a healing spell. He uttered a word of thanks before tending to the transmitter. “However you termed it! Are the cannons over there safe?” “Yep!” “Give me a sign so we can coordinate our attacks!” Mausinger looked up, cast yet another fireball, then shouted, “Assemble! Prepare for a concentration attack on the fake Kingmaker!”

The message spread; soon the soldiers had regrouped around the cannons. The magicians raised their wands, concentrating; those more adept at physical combat settled at the rear to deal with monsters that snuck near. “Uh-” Another crackle of audio. “Watch for a-”

It was as though the darkened Oakenhart had caught wind of their plan, as it roared and flew up, a familiar aura surrounding it. The imitation had finally started to figure out what it was able to do. “Gather round! Now!” He yelled, red haze filling his view as he readied his barrier spell. The ground surrounding the cannons- he pictured the runes covering it, raising a shield of fire. Leonhart, old friend. It was you who helped me refine this spell. Pray my strength is enough!

Echoing tremors in the ground- now! He raised his sword, channeling magic through it- searing heat pulsed as layers upon layers of gnarled branches piled and burnt up on the dome. Shouts of “Sixth sensers- quickly!” Mausinger squeezed his eyes open, looking for cracks to see out of. Something to watch for. it wasn’t enough. A snarl escaped from him. Not enough! He could do better- “Your Majesty!” “Care not about me! The concentration attack!” The smoke obscured sight- then was blown away as one of the magicians cast a wind spell, but- Mausinger blinked the advancing stars out of his eyes and bit back a scathing word. “You-! That would bring away the fir-”

A line of purple light broke through the sky, far away. Was that… that had to be it. That had to be! One more push! The shield glow brighter, hotter- the vines shrunk, revealing the gleam from the direction of the purple tower. “GET READY!” He roared. A united cry as the interior of the dome lit up with even more orbs of fire. He was awfully tempted to just get rid of the shield there and then, but no. He held onto his sword and swung it into the air: the flames forming the shield gathered above him. “NOW!” The rain of fire shot forth, engulfing the fake Oakenhart. A long screech from within the flames- as Mausinger caught his breath, the soldiers began shouting. “Raise the flares! We’ve defeated the Kingmaker!”

With a bang, green and white lit up the air. A deep breath. Just got to guard the cannons now. Mausinger steadied his stance before charging.
“The blue flares are in the air!” Ya Pi heard the gunners say, and raised his polearm—five lances rose to parry a orc-like fiend’s club before two thrust forward, prompting the orc to go up in fumes. He nodded at the two Hydropolitans before casting a glance at where the Grand High Roller was. He heard it from the tales of his grandfather, how there was once a monster infestation that needed Longfang’s help—its doppelganger leapt back, kicking up a cloud of dust; one of its tails whipped at a Broadleaf robot and sent it flying, only avoiding bashing its head against rocks by a Grimalkin soldier.

The Grand High Roller propelled himself over Goldpaw’s sweeping claw with his scepter, and in one fluid movement, sent the blunt end of the scepter—or mace, as he was using it as such—into the claw. Longfang had stormed the nest and dispatched them all in a night raid. The plan was a risky gamble, Ya Pi had told him.

The Kingmaker wreathed itself in fire and flapped its wings—Ya Pi drove his halberd through a skeleplasm as the Grand High Roller issued a command. “Do not let it fly!” Now, it seemed like not engaging it directly was their only approach that wouldn’t cause casualties. Shouts spread throughout the group, and they scattered before harpoons and magic pelted the fake Longfang. It roared and landed, sending embers rising from the ground. The first time it did, the impact and ensuing explosion had blasted them away, already needing a few angel’s tears and soreaways to patch their team up.

The fake Longfang hobbled and roared once again. It was almost time. Cripple its mobility, and then—“The trap!” A last-minute collaboration with the sky pirates when they caught talk of how ferocious Longfang had been before Goldpaw turned to commerce. Ya Pi raised the launcher in the sky. They had encircled the Kingmaker, the cannons placed further away, guarded by the gunners. A glimpse of light, flitting in the embers—another—yet another. Metal webs fitted with weights twisted and narrowed around Longfang, tripping it. The pirates had used it to snag and slay an Incineraptor once. His turn: he aimed at the air and fired. Weights and strands of metal tangled into each other as the fake Kingmaker scuffled. It wouldn’t hold it for long once the metal melted. “Ready the cannons!” Pugnacius ordered, raising his flare.

It would take five seconds for the flare to burst. Four… he threw the launcher at an advancing fiend, unbalancing it. Three… The fake Longfang howled. Two… the metal webs gleamed red-hot. One—

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See? The barrier is down.” “And so are the fake Kingmakers.” “Now they have barely anything to stop them.” “Why are you not going down there? You could easily slay every single one of them, alone.” “You have an army at your back.”

Naverre stared at the army charging at the Horned One through the vat, shouting battle cries. The echoing voices meant nothing. Those traitors were no more—he had contributed them to the revival of Allegoria the first chance he got. Their voices meant…! “After all, you’ve grown up slaying nations.” “Took a few centuries to start mastering the art, but you can do it a few more times with your eyes shut.” “SILENCE!” “Why did you stop?” “Always so hesitant, always so fearful.” “Maybe if you’d conquered more Kingsbonds instead of waiting for your chance, this wouldn’t have happened.” “SHUT UP!”

He gripped the edge of the vat and stumbled. Sat on the stairs, covering his face. Stray souls circled the interior of the shrine as he thought. He did expect it: the world’s worth of elites storming the place, led by its champion. The champion… Evan Pettiwhisker Tildrum, king of Evermore, wielding
Mornstar of the Winterlands.

Naverre knew exactly who he was. Years and years of manipulation had made him acute to the essence of souls, and he had read well on the tales of confrontations between heroes and villains that shared one; bonds of ages weaved together by fate’s hand. A sense of fear, and belonging...

Incomplete as he was, this halfling would have to do.

A soul drifted in front of him. He watched it- it was fine, he was alright- before waving it aside and standing up. It didn’t matter. Once he had wrestled Allegoria back into being and restored the people that mattered, he wouldn’t have to think about it. He was so close, too close to falter now.

Flames of purple and green rose above the vat: the soul was sucked past him into the fire. Soon, he would finish his purpose. It was what… what would’ve been expected of him. He was sure of it. It should’ve been easier to think that way.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 102. Give me a bit of validation I worked hard on this bit haha...

That aside, actually changing around POVs for once was very, very fun to write, so I hope it was fun to read as well! I also wanted to show a bit of interaction between the rulers since we probably won’t get the chance to see that anymore. Blame me and my excessive dependence on canon plot in the earlier chapters lol. In any case, please look forward to the next chapters!
Something made Roland’s hair stand on end- shouts from the soldiers. The transmitter pinned on his jacket fizzled, and went silent. “Look! The Horned One- It’s glowing!” “You know the slap circle! Don’t get too close to it!” The Horned One rumbled, straightening up. Something was going to happen, and he didn’t-

A spark. Oh, no. The Horned One reared back. He did know what was about to happen. They had just spread out to cover more ground, but it was happening too early, too early to anyone to react- he turned, the words of retreat on his mind, and a blast of wind knocked him back as red covered his view.

He had wrote about it in the plan- a warning, but- he picked himself up, and looked at the fiery ruins of Aquila. A breath caught in his throat. This wasn’t right. Fire in the sky, black ruins littering the horizon- this wasn’t Aquila! He raised a hand to pinch himself. The laser had hit one of the cannon squads, detonating the explosives. That was why there was fire. A shake of his head. A trench in the ground, marking where the laser had struck. It wasn’t as strong as what he had seen from Doloran’s memories. Shouts in the distance; no, shouts near him as the rest of the group caught onto what had happened. Smoke fumed up from the edges of the trench. “Where’s his Majesty?!?” “He was with the center group!”

Right. Right- where was Evan?

A second blast of wind answered it. Lofty, in his dragon form, swept aside the smoke. Evan leapt from his head, yelling, light gleaming on Mornstar.

The air twisted, and then a boom. The Horned One reared backwards again, but this time, a cloud of rubble fell from it. Evan landed with perfect balance, and looked up. Hair stuck to his face- blood dribbled from cuts and nicks. “We can’t stop here!” He roared, eyes wide. Two more soldiers slid off from Lofty, stumbling. “We can’t give up! We’ve come so far! We’ve come so FAR!”

As if on cue, the sky behind him lit up- two purple lasers lashed through the sky as the two Zippelins fired at the Horned One and the winged fiends around it. Then glimmers of light, rising up from where the towers once was and bursting on the colossus. Evan raised Mornstar- the air around the glowing sword rippled, as if there was a storm brewing. “Defend the remaining cannons! We can do this!” A united cry as the squad collected their wits. “And have someone help guard the king o’er here!” Lofty added. “He’s youer only hope!”

Initially, it seemed there was almost no need for that, initially; between the waves of monsters and flying cannonballs, Roland looked up to see Evan cutting through fiends and monsters, like a whirlwind dancing through the dark- occasionally punctuated by a strike that could be heard a distance away as it connected with the Horned One. Meanwhile, Lofty flew around the central squad, weaving between the monsters lurking further back, grabbing a handful of them and tossing them elsewhere. Eventually, however, the air began to curdle again- the fiends began to rush them at larger, faster numbers, even outnumbing the skeleplasms and goos; and slowly, trying to hold their ground began less of an option.

Much, much less of an option, Roland realised as he cleaved through a fiend and the residual magic struck six or so in a circle- more efficient than Flatliner- the space that was empty moments ago was
quickly encroached upon by more fiends. He couldn’t see Lofty flying anymore.

“Tani! We have to fall back!” He yelled as he half-fought, half-ran towards the cannons. The group furthest west, headed by Tabbias, had retreated into theirs some time ago, and now even their combined strength was beginning to be inadequate. Tani nodded, and cupping her mouth with one hand, hollered. A dogfolk tossed something into the artilllery, and among other shouts and directions, began their retreat. Soon afterwards, explosions from where they were. “Was destroying them necessary?” One of the Broadleaf soldiers asked. “Gotta make sure no one else uses them.” Tabbias answered, looking up and firing a round of arrows into the shadowy birds in the sky. “Watch out!”

Another one of those- no, Roland realised as the group scattered, it was instead some kind of pitch-black tar that rained down on friend and foe alike. A fiend that was gaining on them was hit by one and promptly melted, leaving behind… what- A scream from ahead. “No!” A grimalkin held a mousefolk by the shoulders as the black tar crept up the latter. A sword clattered onto the ground as the mousefolk looked down at himself. “What…” The word was barely managed before it was engulfed- then the soldier barely had time to block a peculiar blade, so often seen on the creatures controlled by the Horned One.

Tabbias shouted orders to stay away from the pools of tar-like miasma. Cries erupted from all around the battlefield. The grimalkin wailed, cut through their former ally, and picking up the dropped sword, charged forward. The rest of the Dellian division and a few Hydropolitans followed, shouting similar war cries. Did the people of Allegoria also meet this fate? Then… Roland looked back at where the tar had hit the fiend, a few paces away.

An orb of light floated. A soul…? Before he knew it, he was approaching it, holding a hand out to inspect the light- it being engulfed in the dark made him take it back. He’d been warned about this before, Roland grumbled internally and readied himself for yet another confrontation… Except the wraith didn’t move when it formed. It just stood there, motionless. A screech behind him, and he turned. A skeleplasm- 

Something bisected it: a peculiar sword. A shout as the monster crumbled to dust. “Get down!” Tani yelled, and as Roland ducked, an arrow soared over him and through the wraith. A glance further into the haze; if there was anything of note, it was too dark to see. “Hurry up and get over here!” Tani added, and Roland figured he was just lucky that the sword hit the skeleplasm first before hurrying back into the fray.

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“There’s no end to this onslaught…” Leander grumbled as he sent his spear spinning to knock back his foes. “If this is the Horned One’s way of toying with us…” “We need an Angel’s Tear here!” The Junior Consul was the first to respond. “I still have one!”

It was true; even with the maintained attack from all sides on the Horned One, it didn’t look as much as scratched- as much as Roland wanted to feel relief its attacks were few and far between, the wraiths were making it near impossible. Doloran, if you’re still keeping the damn thing in check, you better get it to end this quick. He mused inwardly, just in time to hear the Horned One roar. The cracks between the rocks began to glow as it reared back. Not like that!

“Evan!” Batu shouted. “If ye wanna do anythin’, you better do it now! We’re in a bad spot here!” They were indeed sandwiched in the middle, the east groups having joined them soon after: an easy target. “Yoi, yoi, yoi, hol’up!” Lofty shouted, not a dragon anymore, jumping over the heads of the soldiers. Something gleamed in his stubbly hands. “Evan, catch this!”

A gold orb soared over them towards Evan; unlike the soft yellow glow that the souls bore, this was
almost the color that people would associate with the sun. It landed on Evan’s head, and a soft breeze
kicked up, raising his cape- Evan himself began to glow. “Lofty?” The king asked, confused. “No
questions, mun! Ya better get that Mornstar a-flingin’!” “Right!”

The king raised Mornstar. The golden light grew brighter, rising, as if it was an extension of the
sword itself. As Evan brought down the light, the rebounding winds swept a cloud of dust in their
faces. The rubble sifted; coughs and shouts as the dust cleared, and the group of soldiers looked up to
see the field completely cleared of fiends. Further ahead, the Horned One rumbled, a low groan like
worn metal- then it fell forward, its cracks and face dimming.

For a long, long while, no one said anything. And then a clatter as a weapon hit the rubble. The
Horned One continued to lean forward. The skies continued to be a muddled maroon, but nothing
climbed out from within the haze. One of the soldiers tumbled forward, their knees hitting the
ground. Another rushed forward. The group gradually spread out as people tended to their wounds
and others’.

“I’m detecting a decrease in magic levels in the area.” Bracken reported. “Looks like the Horned
One’s down for now.” “Which means there’s one more thing to do.” Evan looked at Lofty, who
promptly flapped his arms. “Not that quick, mun! I’ve barely caught my flippin’ breath throwing all
the glims ‘nd all!” “What was that gold… glim, was it?” Bracken stared at the Kingmaker. “What
was that about?” “Look- I only got to revive the art o’ glims recently, I don’t know! I was gonna
throw a blue one- the magic one, ya know, and then suddenly I felt all powerful, and the glim just
turned shiny in m’hands. Took a hell lot out o’ me, zero out of ten, won’t recommend again.”

“Your Majesty!” Tabbias ran over. “Leave them to me- I can take care of the people here until the
rest of them assembles here.” “Thank you, Tabbias.” Evan turned to Lofty. “We still have one more
phase to go in our operation. Are you ready?” “Fine, fine!” Lofty glowed, and his dragon form rose
from it. “Hop on.”

They settled at what would be the dragon’s nape; a few larger scales pointed upwards. “Call it late,”
Leander began, “But certainly we have something to hold onto while you fly-” Either Lofty didn’t
hear it or didn’t bother, as in a whoosh, the wind flattened them against the dragon. Roland reached
for the nearest scale and held on. Airborne... craft didn’t work like that, he thought futilely, as the
ground beneath fell further and further away; then dark closed up overhead.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 103! One final instance of the ‘Roland thinking that’s not
how technology worked’ gag and I kind of imagined Mornstar working like DS3’s
Storm Ruler in terms of its attacks. I decided to forego the entire bit about fighting up
close because well, the slap circle.

In any case, now we’re getting into Allegoria and things are still gonna go at like
90kmph, I’ll apologize in advance haha
What a boy sees in Allegoria

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was dark and stifling, where they were, so much so that the air was almost still-

“Roland.” He blinked at the sound and figured the place wasn’t exactly as dark as he… thought? Underneath, the white scales Lofty had reflected soft light that came from glowing tendrils and translucent patches along the narrow rocky passages while the Kingmaker maneuvered between them. Leander edged closer, still making sure he was holding onto something solid. Roland shook his head. “Yeah, I can guess.” If the air curdled outside the Horned One, it was a headache-inducing pulse here, he realised. “We’re in the Horned One’s territory, can’t be helped-”

A jolt upwards- then for a moment, they were blinded. The next, a bright blue sky and glittering white underneath. “Golly.” Tani’s voice, but as the surroundings came into focus, he felt as if something had punched him between the eyes with a sledgehammer.

The buildings below, marble, lined with pillars, topped with gold roofs. A square in the centre, marked by a lazily spinning crystal spire- through which magic was channeled to hold up the floating islands. A relic from back when Allegoria was first raised into the skies; the work of its first queen before she passed.

A watchtower that oversaw the main city, functioning also as an archive and magic research facility. Four gazebos on each corner of the main island, each holding a crystal: while it was a teleporter to the other outlying islands, it was also commemoration for the brave deeds of a king and queen who had slain four great beasts that terrorised the skies even before Allegoria had a Kingmaker. The streets and paths crossing over each other, renovated and repurposed tens of times as people slowly began to spread out to the rest of the floating lands; but they would be filled every festival, as they celebrated.

And above all that, connected by a long set of stairs, a castle with the same architecture as the smaller buildings, but further decorated by a crystal arch; at the right times of the day and night, it would reflect light so that it looked as though stars were floating in the city; a compromise that didn’t involve a statue, thankfully-

All of this, lost in the stormy night, right here, as though nothing had happened at all.

“This is… this can’t be the dimension where Allegoria was swallowed up in, right?” Bracken asked. “No.” Roland muttered, still working to keep himself in check. “This isn’t. They were all broken up.” “Then it might perhaps be a memory of Naverre’s.” Leander mused. “Or even his desires, given form.” “Ye mean this is what he wants?” Batu scratched his head. “Just any other day?” “I don’t know.” “If youer’ done with admiring the sights, I’d like to just land, y’know?” Lofty cut in. “Stuff’s tirin’ me out.”

They did, on the outermost western street- Lofty turned back into his smaller form once everyone had slid off, and then hopped, raising a hand as if he was looking at something. “Och, youer seein’ that?” They followed Lofty’s stare to a figure running down the street. A masked wraith, but unlike the sinewy ones they saw on the battlefield, this was crystalline, reflecting light, even- “Another illusion.” Bracken determined, making Roland frown in puzzlement. “If the entire place is one, then wouldn’t be hard to guess the people are too.” “As long as they don’t attack us… speaking of which.” Tani muttered. “You would’ve thought Naverre would’ve stormed in yelling about useless
struggling or something.” Or intercepted their fight with the Horned One, if they had to go that far, Roland briefly mused before returning to the task at hand. “He’s in the castle- the cradle’s just beyond it.”

The crystalline fiends paid no attention to them as they headed to the gate. “It’s closed.” Evan hummed. Lofty hopped. “Och, don’t touch it-” A push, and the gates swung open. “There’s gotta be a trap somewhere, I tell you!” Lofty insisted as they started heading up the stairs. “This set of stairs are gonna collapse, and-”

There wasn’t. “Don’t tell me the stairs are his defence…” Leander grumbled, having decided to sit on a lance like it was a witch’s broom one thirds of the way. Lofty had hopped on soon after on the grounds of preserving strength. “At least we had our practice.” Tani said, stepping onto the landing.

The throne room was empty and a sterile white; the corridor to the left led to the cradle. Midway, Tani perked up. “You hear a voice?” “No, not-” “Shh!” They stopped, and upon focusing, there was indeed murmurs in the air. “This way!” Tani said, and hurried forward.

Words sunk and rose like fog.

“Well, minister of war. What has become of your crusade against the Kingmaker? It has been years, and he still hogs every work there is, despite your insistence.” “We can help you.” A pause. “How?” “We take it to the person next to him.” “The king?! But-” “Do you wish to avenge the queen, warmaster? Your daughter?” “The coronation is tomorrow.” “We only need to loosen the bonds between king and Kingmaker, and the rest will follow. And your grandson will soon be back at your side.”

A spectre stood in front of the room, a young boy in black clothes and green hair. Tani gaped, pointing, and was loudly shushed by Batu. “What is your benefit?” “Power. And a little money. That is all we require- both will come once we take hold of what should be ours.” A long, long pause. “I give you that promise. I… must do this for Allegoria.” The voice lowered into a gravelly monotone. “We must purge it of all threats.” “No matter the cost.” “Yes…” A familiar voice cut off the dialogue. “What are you doing, Naverre?” The spectre turned around, and Roland felt his head turn into a buzzing mess.

He either didn’t realise it or didn’t want to realise it, but Naverre and Evan- they looked too alike to be true. “I had a bad dream again.” Naverre’s spectre said. Bracken elbowed Roland, and he looked up to see a second spectre- Doloran, with the white gown and cape and strange blue coloration and gold horns he had seen- or known?- in the dream. “It’s late. Let’s get you back-” “Doloran.” Naverre interrupted, whispering. “Did you hear that?”

Doloran stared ahead vacantly for a few seconds- the voices in the room had gone still. Then his face formed a mild smile. “The ministers are simply carrying out a meeting, Naverre. A long time ago, your father- never mind. Let’s get you to bed. I’ll tell you that story another time.”

The two remnants of a memory passed them and went the other way, and immediately Tani broke the silence.

“That- that was Doloran? And Naverre? What?” That day, when Allegoria fell- “Now I believe the legends of soulmates: they really do resemble each other.” Leander said that, but that day, the blink of blue and yellow- “Wait- wait, yall, let’s just recap what we saw-” Naverre calling Evan a halfling, talking as though the young king would immediately understand- “You would’ve thought youer a big ‘everythin’s fine’ man, but flip, mun, youer soulmate’s somethin’!” It wasn’t simply spiteful half-grimalkin discrimination. “Roland? Ye’ve been plenty-”

“Guys!” He raised his hands, and the uproar hushed. It wasn’t helping how everything felt too fast at the moment. “I-” This was giving him a headache, for the love of- he rearranged his question.
“Leander, you’re the most knowledgeable about souls. Tell me what happens if a soul is cut- split into two, maybe.” “What?” Leander furrowed his brows. “The victim wouldn’t have survived it. At the very most, an optimistic hypothesis would be that the soul would repair itself and reincarnate-”
“But what if you sustain one of the parts with magic? Like life support?” “Life…? I suppose it’ll recover at an extremely slow rate, but they…” Leander straightened up. “You aren’t simply raising a hypothesis.” “It sounds mad, I’m aware of it, but I think that’s what happened with Naverre. I thought the Horned One just took his soul like what we’ve been seeing lately, but-” If it was the case- “-I think that’s what truly happened. The Horned One has one part of Naverre’s soul. The other, the half that couldn’t survive and reincarnated eventually-”

“It’s me.” Evan concluded, and the group turned to him. “The only way to confirm this is to ask Naverre himself, so that’s all the more reason for us to keep going.” He was a lot more calmer than Roland had expected. “You’re not questioning this? At all?” Bracken asked, and Evan shook his head. “I’ve been giving it some thought. Before we started preparing for the attack on the Horned One- If there was something similar between us, or even something that connected us, and… well, I guess it got so much I even dreamt about debating it with someone. He mentioned the essence of souls, and…” Evan shrugged. “It was a curious concept. I couldn’t help but mull over it a little.”

“I shan’t comment on how stressing so much that work would overtake your dreams is unhealthy in itself, but you’re right.” Leander said. “The only way we can know is to confront Naverre himself. Shall we?”

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Selective ignorance was a terrible thing, Roland repeated inwardly as they neared the cradle. He should’ve seen it way ear-

The marble path ended. The cradle, wreathed in gold and relatively mossy stone gleamed in the fake sunlight, reflecting it onto a field of brown flowers- it was too bright, bright enough to interrupt his ranting.

The only problem was that blinding light shouldn’t be able to make his legs give out and hit the grass. Brown petals- but the flowers were neither crumbling nor wilted. They were like that- plants native to deserts, and with ages of careful cultivation, suited to high altitudes. Physically, he was not old enough to just flop over like that- hell, he shouldn’t be thinking so foggily when the rest of the group was shouting alarmed phrases in his ears, but everything was so dazzling-

“Flippin’ get up, get up, ya dingus,” Lofty yelled, sharply yanking him back into reality. “What did I tell you?” Out of the corner of his eye, purple patches wavered on the jacket sleeve. Roland squeezed his eyes shut, blinked, and with a bit of help, stood up. “Blame it on nostalgia.” He muttered. “Come on.”

They pushed open the door, but no breeze came from within. The corridor leading inside was stagnant and even moldy, and soon, they reached the interior- an outrageous mutilation of the shrine, where statues and insignias of snakes bearing eerie fire lined the walls. A narrow set of stairs led up to four pillars pulsing with light and darkness, and on the top stood-

“Naverre!” Evan shouted. The Allegorian king raised a hand to his headdress- glimmers of light as the metal item began to glow. “I know who I am, who we are now! I am- no, I was you!”

Naverre seemed to pay no attention, but the headdress faded- and unruly, even matted, navy hair tumbled onto the shoulder guards. Blue and yellow. “What?” Leander began, flabbergasted, “But you said it was a hyp-” A shout of alarm from Tani, and the next moment, a loud clang as Momstar clashed with Noumenia. Evan let out a small grunt as he locked blades with Naverre, with the sickly
green skin and dull red eyes and a sneer- or a desperate grin on his face as he pushed down.

“Then don’t look at me with that pitying face of mine, halfling. Do what you must.”

“Evan!” Tani shouted, and with a readying step, flung a javelin forward. Naverre raised his hand; Evan tumbled forward from the sudden lack of resistance, the javelin was stopped by a barrier of purple, and Naverre raised his sword ever so slightly against Evan’s neck before the latter parried it upwards with his own and leapt back. Naverre stared at his half-reincarnation, who pressed his hand to his neck with a grimace. No blood when he removed it; the javelin clattered to the ground as Naverre dismissed the barrier and a two-handed staff with ornate purple gems appeared in his hand instead.

“That’s more like it.” The Allegorian king stated before his grip on the weapons tightened and he rushed at them again.

Chapter End Notes

Hey it's high time I just dropped the bomb: Naverre, Evan+err. Also a callback to what Roland said in act 8 because heck yeah i love callbacks

Thank you for reading chapter 104! Since Doloran lived much longer than his canon version, his perception of Allegoria is mostly on its historical/functional values. And I thought I'd finally give some background on how the Zodiarchy went wonky, since Doloran's right, if they were loyal to the previous king there wasn't exactly a reason to not be to the current one. It's probably really short but I hope, er, it works.
Roland ducked as a wave of darkness lashed just over his head- he raised his gun and fired into a barrier that Naverre had raised in that few seconds.

From where the barrier didn’t cover, Batu roared, swinging his axe down to meet with a lance that Naverre summoned. With a swift moment and a flash of light, the Allegorian king was wielding Noumenia once more, ready to slash at Batu- purple whips curled around Naverre’s arm and pulled. “Get back, Batu!” Leander grunted, holding onto his wand- and almost lost balance when Naverre disappeared. A volley of arrows whizzed past where he was and thudded into a wall decoration’s gaping maw.

From how things looked, their only advantage was outnumbering Naverre, and that- Leander appeared in a flash of light, a few paces away, and a scythe of darkness raised a line-like shockwave that tore through the ground, reducing a health bot to dust. “Oh, you-” Bracken snarled, “I just set that up!”

Naverre appeared close enough; darting forward, Roland swung his sword, heard a screech of metal, and with a perplexed look, the Allegorian king had disappeared again, instead focusing his ire on Evan. “The whole treasury on him knowing yer Doloran’s soulmate, Roland!” Batu yelled as he docked a fire-imbued arrow on his bow. “What’s yer goal anyway, kid? Bringing back Allegoria? Raising the dead with the alive? What’s so good about it anyway?”

Naverre didn’t fall for the taunt- in fact, he had kept unnervingly quiet throughout the fight, but Evan caught on. “It won’t be worth it!” He added, and almost instantly, broke through the battle-hardened sorcerer; Naverre snarled and with a kick, sent the younger king stumbling back. “Oh, enlighten me! What would you know?” He raised his staff. “Heed my call, warriors, and conquer!”

The maws that lined the walls burst with strange flames that snaked through the floor, marking a rune. The flames died down into ash; the ash ballooned, breaking off into shapes- into the sinewy fiends they had gotten used to seeing in the past few hours. Oh great, their only advantage was gone too. “I would know! You set me up to lose everything like you did!” Evan yelled, “I don’t know if you did it out of spite, or in hopes I could find a different ending, or, just wanted me to feel the same way as you do! And I would be lying if I didn’t imagine crusading back to Ding Dong Dell and returning everything to how it was!” He cut through a fiend. “But what good would that be? The past is the past! Everyone who died would stay dead and I wouldn’t even be the prince of Ding Dong Dell anymore! I wouldn’t even be myself anymore!” He took a breath. “What good would that be?!”

Naverre paused for a brief moment, then sneered. “You talk, but what about your nation? Your dear Evermore? You simply raised it as your ideal version of Ding Dong Dell! A place where people live despite their differences- that is no different!” A fiend exploded a bit close for comfort- a triumphant curse as Batu docked another. “Focus your fire on the Nav!” Lofty quickly yelled. “We got to beat him enough to start talking sense into him!” The Kingmaker looked down- frost was gathering at his feet. “Oh, fl-”

A yelp as Lofty bounced off the ceiling. The pillar of ice Naverre summoned glowed and shattered, sending shards of ice hurtling into the group- Roland flinched as a few flew right past his face and pierced a monster. The Allegorian king blocked a sparking kick from Bracken. “Talk sense into
me?” Naverre hissed, a crack as his grip on the prosthetic tightened, “Such boasts.” “Then what are you trying to do, Naverre?” Roland asked, dispatching of the last of the fiends. “What’s the point?”

He counted on his connections; and it seemed to work. With a second kick, Bracken freed her prosthetic, and the Evermore crew regrouped. “Bring back the Kingmaker, and the nation lives with it...” Naverre muttered, “And then-” “And then what?” Roland interrupted. “Some kind of idyllic life in the woods, with brainless goos and skeleplasms at your side?” “I-” “Your Kingmaker wouldn’t have wanted this, Naverre! You know it!”

The only warning they had that he had crossed a line was Naverre slamming his staff onto the ground with a cry- a sense of something knocking him back, and a loud boom, and then sunlight gleamed through clouds of dust, much too bright. Something moved in it, and he raised his sword just in time to block something that darted out from within the rubble. Leaves and brown petals rose as the impact sent him skidding into the flower field- when the ground finally came to a stop, Roland raised his head to see Noumenia gleaming yellow, and beyond it, Naverre, the dust cloud making the king look as though he was breathing steam.

“You’re right. All of you are right. But why?” Naverre growled. “All of you got your happy endings, but... but what about me? Why did you show up here?” What? It wasn’t like he had any choice in the matter- the next sentence, quiet and strained, stopped his retort. “I would be happy without one but you just had to- had to give me hope!”

He definitely wasn’t putting up a fight anymore. “A thousand and eight hundred years: all that time, all I had was Noumenia and that shrine- I fought with and against nations on the surface, lived through all of that... no.” The pressure from locking blades slackened. “I couldn’t die. That’s how I knew. Revive the nation, and the Kingmaker will live with it- someone, something that can stand the test of time, remain no matter the circumstances...”

A crash from behind him. Roland looked back to see the arch overseeing the castle collapsing, taking the ivory building with it- his sight trailed from the crumbling buildings to the ruins of the pathway to the garden, to the wilted brown flowers that surrounded them, to the rest of the Evermore crew hurrying forth, and back to Naverre.

A gentle rustle as Noumenia hit slivers of brown petals. “I hate him. I hated him! He never did anything- he never even told me where he had gone! But it wasn’t his fault, and- and I knew that too!” Naverre raised his hands to grab Roland’s shoulders, his voice a shivering stutter. The boy sagged, lowering his head. “Let me do this, Roland Crane. Forgive me, let- let me prove to myself a thousand years of killing and blackmailing and living wasn’t for nothing, please, you’re living proof that he’s still in reach, the world can’t be so merciless to not grant even one wish- just one...” Naverre looked up, a breath catching in his throat. “What- what happened to you?”

Roland felt his eyebrows tighten before he glanced down. The scarf he had kept around his neck had loosened- it must’ve revealed the swirling, dark colors that stretched jaggedly onto his face. “It’s...” He had to know. “Whatever you’re trying to bring back, it isn’t Doloran. It’s what broke your soul, made you like this. And it’s-” Roland took off his gloves, dropped them in the grass and showed his hands, also completely ‘gone’. “-making this happen to us. if you do release it, well-”

The grip on his shoulders slipped. Naverre took a step back, swaying lightly, his eyes a still, watery red.

“...I don’t want to fight anymore.”

He couldn’t even bring himself to sigh in relief. “You can stop this, Naverre. We can stop this cycle of sorrow.” Evan attempted. No response. Something was wrong. “Naverre?” “Aw, flip-” Lofty
shouted. “This ain’t-”

The feeling was one that was still fresh on his mind—only a few seconds of sudden dread allocated to him as he watched a missile tear through the sky. A vessel that brimmed, ready to-

“I don’t want to fight anymore.” Naverre repeated, again, and a purple aura exploded from around him.

“What’s going on, Lofty?!” Roland yelled as the Allegorian king summoned his staff in stilted movements. “The horrible black stuff— it’s puppeting him!” Lofty replied, “Having half a soul’s got to make him more vulnerable! Hold right on, laddo, this is gonna suck!”

Strands of light joined the swirls of dark aura— broken Kingsbonds that started to surround Naverre like a cocoon. He couldn’t find the strength to stand. “Hold on!” Lofty shouted again, this time more… more in his head? Out of the corner of his eye, the Kingmaker glowed, even though he looked clearly strained.

The Horned One was being summoned, he knew that very well— and then he would be gone. The patches had even started showing on the sleeves of his jacket, even— he didn’t have to know how bad it was getting. A frantic grab in front of him, for Noumenia. It would get much, much stronger, and if, somehow, Lofty was dragged into this mess, then— he saw his fingers curl around the sword. Just— just a while longer…!

He yelled, hoping Lofty could hear him, as the sky itself began to collapse.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading chapter 105! You know, sometimes I do feel like I’ve been too harsh with Naverre.

The half-soul thing honestly wasn’t meant to really do much other than hopefully showing the two kids are the same in essence. Evan is technically his own person by reincarnation, so no point in that; whereas the imagery of Allegoria just crumbling mid-fight is pretty much how he doesn’t care what happens to it. The boy doesn’t have a lot of attachment to the place. And more callbacks! I love callbacks ha
Rocks the size of buildings rained down on them, only to land as trickles of sand. The shell that was the Horned One continued to collapse, revealing a sky that burnt white-hot; the cocoon of light and dark resembled an eclipse against it.

If the Horned One was unleashed, then… Leander quickly looked away. Roland was… there, struggling to stand with the yellow blade, Noumenia, but he was there, staring at the sky. Thank the gods. Lofty got up, having toppled a few moments earlier, and was yelling his curses again, much more agitatedly than before, and another pulse of light in the sky made him return his attention to it.

Against the light, Naverre raised his arms.

It was a whisper, but it could be heard all the same, meters below.

“We will be free.”

The cocoon unravelled, reaching around the edges of the light. A barely visible form coalesced; one that was the size of a normal person, reaching its arms out towards the puppet king, as if in preparation of an embrace-

The light burned. The next second, a hand of blood-red flames closed around where Naverre had been. A shocked yelp from Evan. Silver, green and blood red threads spread from its fingertips, forming a scaly, taloned hand, then a spiked torso, then a body, then wings unfurled, lined with veins. Blood red thunder crackled around the towering monstrosity, almost as tall as Hydropolis’ watchtower.

The Horned One roared with a thousand voices, and the sky crumbled at its fingertips; a pull, and blue fell apart to give way to dark, swirling colors and its purple edges. A rumbling cry, and the monster disappeared into the dark.

“Flip, flip, flip- FLIP!” Lofty stamped his foot. “Can’t even do one thing right-” “Maybe it’s the wrong time to ask, but why is it running away?” Bracken asked. She raised a crucial point. “Bah, it won’t matter if we can catch ‘nd pulp it.” Batu spat, turning to Evan. After all, if what Roland told Naverre was somehow enough to sway him, then… Leander glanced at him, who had kept his eyes on the fissure in the sky. “Yer call, Evan lad, let’s put that Mornstar o’ yers to some proper use!”

“Right!” Evan answered. Lofty hopped, glowing, or perhaps, glowering. “Damned right, youer! We’ll give the thing all ‘o ouer beef!” A shine, and the dragon Kingmaker pressed his head on the ground, snorting once, a non-vocal usher for them to get on. The two leaders of the group settled in the front, and once the rest of them got on, Lofty soared into the air, and into the fissure.

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The dragon Kingmaker twisted its way through rubble and broken buildings, suspended in nothing. The reality of Allegoria, cast aside by the Horned One’s rampage. “It really is running away.” Bracken muttered. “We’ve got to find it before this place swallows up the world outside.” To the front of Lofty’s head, Tani perked up and pointed ahead. “There!”

The monstrosity had landed on a larger piece of land, a barren rock with scattered ivory and gold
tiles, leading to a moss-covered Kingmaker’s cradle; Lofty landed carefully on the other end, letting the group slip off while it screeched and tore at itself. A few gleaming strands rose and snapped back into place just as quickly - then Lofty had launched itself at the Horned One. “Come on!” Evan yelled, the group beginning their sprint to catch up with Lofty. The monster turned around in time to get tackled by the full brunt of a charging dragon - kicking up a dust cloud that was promptly broken through by as Lofty, who had coiled around the monster, flying up briefly before releasing it and tackling it back into the ground. Despite their rush to join the fight, Bracken loudly whooped. “Nice suplex, Lofty!” Tani looked at her. “That’s called a sup- suplex?” He supposed that was just how priorities were sometimes, and summoned his lance.

As much as he’d hoped that the Horned One would felled by that single attack, he wasn’t surprised that it wasn’t the case, either. A clawed hand rose and grabbed Lofty’s arm, flinging the dragon towards them. Evan skidded to a halt and raised Mornstar in response. A gold gleam surrounded the dragon, shrinking back into his shorter form and allowing Evan to catch the bouncing Lofty. Roland rushed ahead, Noumenia held ready. The Horned One rose from the crater it had formed on the rock, eyes gleaming a furious red. It was at least four, five times as tall as Leander was, with a hide that almost resembled stone.

A monstrous entity that needed similarly powerful measures, and since he was already lagging behind the rest, Leander summoned his lance. A near-ancestral spell that every Hydropolitan knew, reserved for direful situations with a few backup weapons. *Brave warrior of yore, guide my hand*; the lance crackled blue. He leapt, the flow of magic levitating him, and launched the lance at the Horned One.

He landed in time to see the lance hit the Horned One right in the face and explode into light, and summoned his wand before hurrying and willing magic through it. The Horned One roared, and the space next to it split to reveal a dark claw that lashed at its closest foe - Roland, who swiftly blocked and cut through it. Two drones soared over the pirate’s head to start peppering the monster with bullets, and Bracken threw a few more into the air before summoning her axe into her hands.

It was close enough. Leander raised his wand, the rune for honing bolts melting into view - Evan did as well, and twin swarms of magic were joined by rays of light from the drones, having shed shells to reveal prisms. Bracken swung her axe, barely managing to block a punch from the Horned One and driving it into the ground to stop her momentum, just as the barrage hit the monster. It was enough to throw off its balance, and for that moment, it wobbled. There, if they could force it down -

Ice gathered underneath its foot and a glacial spike stabbed upwards. Two arrows hit its chest and exploded into flames; an orb of light hit its head, another barrage of lasers followed, and Leander readied for a second spike. A screech echoed in the air and the Horned One flapped its wings, the dark aura he’d seen before sputtering around it. Something seemed to pin it down, something -

Noumenia, stabbed through its right forearm. The limb *disconnected* abruptly, a circumference of empty space between the edges where strands of light loosened and frayed from the edges like molten metal; the Horned One screeched again, disappearing in a flash of purple. Roland raised the yellow blade and drove it through the remaining limb. Blood-red fire and golden spheres of light passed him briefly before he looked up, at them.

A roar from behind. Not at them, past them! The Horned One raised its good hand, sigils appearing around it. It was recognizable at first sight; the entity’s four most recent victims - the ground and the sky glowed, and magic burnt in the air - “Get close!” Leander shouted, bracing himself. There was only so much time for him to throw up a magic shield - “Forget it!” Lofty yelled back. “This ain’t somethin’ block-worthy!”
It wasn’t, he admitted a few seconds later as he leapt out of the way of a falling rock that immediately exploded upon getting struck by a bolt of lightning, rows of both storming the ruins they stood on- embers set lashing vines on fire that Evan, a distance away cut through while the latter broke through the ground; changing the shield’s elements so quickly was barely possible, and excruciating at that, so Lofty was- A familiar chill in the air. Leander turned and summoned a shield in time to fend against a blast of ice, shards of ice hitting the half-dome before the beam of ice turned upwards and a sensation akin to getting hit by a wooden beam registered on his waist.

If the branch was on fire, his tumbling against the stone floor may well have put it out, he thought as he pushed himself up with his elbows and hissed. “Leander!” Someone yelled, and he ducked as another blast of ice missed him by a few inches. It seemed like the attack was slowing down… he summoned a lance to help hoist himself up, and was instead pulled to his feet by Batu, the jolt making him bite back a curse. Batu, with a bleeding cut on his forehead glanced at Leander’s waist and swore loudly, taking out a soreaway and practically stuffed the leaves in his mouth.

The stabbing pain lessened enough for him to focus, just in time to see a row of lightning rage across the rock, the sparks receded, revealing the Horned One, just beyond the edge of the piece of land they were on, a completely dark, yet glowing sphere almost eclipsing the entity. It was familiar, from the siege of Allegoria, when it was about to- The air pulsed and the beam roared past them, encompassing most of the central space and blocking out sight of the other side. A drone hovered too close and promptly was swallowed in the light. No signs of it stopping; it looked as if it was getting larger, if th-

A roar; the beam incomprehensibly curved upwards, then sputtered and blinked out. The Horned One swatted pillars with its tail as they converged on it, but it had missed the particular large metal roof that was struck it from behind and forced it crash back onto the rock. They were ready; the Horned One roared and pushed the rubble off itself, and the rest of what Leander could see apart from the runes and spells and the arc of a second Titan’s lance he had conjured was flashes of light and fire. When they could see the entity again, wounds and burns littered its body; it tried to flap its wings, swaying. A scar on its chest pulsed purple on its yellow chestguard-like hide- had they seen it before?

“Look! On its chest!” Tani yelled and pointed, confirming that no, they hadn’t. A weak point? “Let’s go, Evan!” Lofty shouted, and the king rushed forward, an ethereal light surrounding Mornstar, but the Horned One looked up, red eyes glowing fiercely, and with a howl, drove its good hand into the ground. A shockwave of purple and black flared up from the rock, deterring Evan; when it subsided, a fissure a few people’s width stood between them and the Horned One. Evan growled lowly, then turned to Lofty. “Can you turn into your dragon form?” “I just got thrown like a ragdoll-” The Horned One was airborne now, moving slowly but surely further. “I need the boost, Lofty!” “Damn it! Give me a few seconds to rev up!”

Cracks and pops- Leander glanced back to see the rubble that had tackled the Horned One to them now in the air, crumpling- Roland stood underneath it, hand held up and curling into a fist. Another series of the sounds, and the once-constructs had flattened into spikes- then they had launched themselves in the direction of the Horned One. (When had he gotten adept at this?) It swatted aside one, dodged another, but the third pierced its wing, and suddenly, it found itself struggling to keep itself aloft. “Alright, get on!” Evan called, the red dragon he was getting used to seeing already coiling on the ground.

The dragon lifted into the air. The two consuls were the last to get on, and so they were further back. “That should do it.” Leander muttered. “Evan strikes, and that would be the end of our troubles.” There was no answer. A glow had enveloped the space ahead; Evan was wielding the power of Mornstar, surely. Leander looked back, and noticed that the corruption had disappeared.
completely from Roland- surely that would’ve been an exhausting experience. In any case, it would be a relief to see that he was fine.

A battle cry; the warm glow intensified into bright light, and beyond it- a blinding white that hit Lofty’s scales and cast shadows along them, and Leander could see it.

A fiend bearing a mask, standing next to him, where his friend and colleague should’ve been. The light grew brighter, and the illusion shattered.

Chapter End Notes

That's what you get for telling him to shoot you back then, Leander uwu

Thank you for reading chapter 106! I did throw out a few hints as to what'll follow back in some of the previous chapters, so hopefully it won't seem too deus/diabolus ex machina-ey. Naverre did one good thing in confining the Horned One in a physical form, so... atta boy? I guess? Anyway, thanks for following the story thus far. Do ask any questions if you feel the need to!

And also, hey, it's 150k words now huzzah
It was odd, how he currently had his back to something considering everything that happened just a few moments ago.

He stayed there for a while, recollecting his wits.

"Lofty, let go!"

He had shouted through the link, just like Lofty had. “What? No!” Lofty had retorted, but it wasn’t a request. Both his hands had taken hold of Noumenia. “Let go!” A pulse, and then the Kingmaker’s presence was gone, and darkness had swallowed him in an instance. He focused. He was- no, his soulmate held dominion over the Horned One before. Surely him, who was the same, could do the same as well…

The blank coldness crept back, just barely- a small, weak light appeared in front of him. A sphere of light- a soul, but even then his consciousness was failing him by then. The repercussions of trying to steal your own soul, perhaps, he had thought briefly.

The crystalline wraiths back then- they had been taking up the role as a substitute for the citizens of Allegoria, and cast the illusion of such. If he could… he did a metaphorical shake of his head. His own illusion, the purpose of it, was to-

The memories cut off there. But if he could think, then surely it had worked, and at the same time, he was where ‘in-between’ was.

He counted to three and opened his eyes to a sky of golden stars. He raised his right arm- his hand hung limp and unresponsive, but he could feel it, the shifting of fabric against the rest of his arm. He raised his left and stretched his fingers, and he could- he could feel that as well. He could recognise he was lying against sandy ground, from under his neck, and taking account of that, he sat up.

It wasn’t bright, but not dark either, like an urban dusk. Sand stretched out for miles, with broken structures and buildings littering the landscape. The air was almost still- almost.

Doloran sat a small distance away, staring into nothing. From the memory, he hadn’t been aware, but his soulmate was a truly sorry sight- the lower half of his robe was torn, and what remained of it was bloodied and in tatters, showing a darkly colored shirt and matching trousers underneath. The wing-like cape was gone, and silver hair spread messily over his back, not even held back by a hairband.

Roland shuffled over, and his soulmate looked up at him. After a few moments, Doloran coughed. “The Horned One.” It was a raspy voice. “Is it…” If he was now awake, then, surely- “Yeah.” Roland answered. “It’s gone.” His soulmate looked forward again. “I’m glad.”

There was a weariness and none of the relief in the answer that he was quickly aware of, that he couldn’t help but share. After all, despite all that was done- it had still come to this, in the end. Lost in a realm in nowhere.

He couldn’t give up, though. Not now- he’d made the promise he wouldn’t. He let out a long breath and got up. “Where the wind leads- that’s where the exit is…” It was what Evan said, when
they had first met. A crunch of sand underneath his boots. “Doloran, come on-” “No.” Roland stared for a few seconds, deciding on what he was supposed to feel at the moment, and sighed. “You don’t want to-” “Do you see those stars up there?”

The golden stars ahead didn’t blink, and if he squinted, they were almost… spherical. It was odd. “Those are Kingmakers, too.” Like… the golden spheres Lofty had fallen out of? “And the ruins, the nations ruined by Realmwreckers, lie here too. I- I belong here.” Doloran looked up. “If I could still cast magic, I would sever our link the moment I woke up, but as things stand-” “What- you’re kidding me. You said you wanted to experience the world for yourself!” “It’s over, Roland. It’s over. Nothing is the same anymore. Nothing has been since Allegoria.”

Doloran curled up, stiffly. “The lands, the people I used to know, none of it… and now the sole remnant of the past I could grasp is proven blasphemy. Kingmakers, the creations formed from a wish to change the world, creations I helped make, myself- all of that…” For a few moments, he was still, silver hair obscuring his face, and for those moments, Roland was looking at a man ages too old. “I’m tired, Roland. Watching through your eyes was a comfort, but that’s… that’s over now.”

All things considered, the had every reason to feel that way, but hearing it was disheartening, really. “Naverre still wanted to see you again, you kn-”

It made Doloran look up quickly, eyes widened in anger. “That was just the Horned One! You knew that! It was just-” “Listen!” Roland interrupted, “Pugnacius wanted his nation to prosper, so the Horned One made him cheat for money. Nerea wanted to give up, and the Horned One made her. Zip wanted his reactor to work, so the Horned One made him overwork his colleagues. Vermine wanted power, and…” The words pieced themselves together. “You wanted to believe Kingmakers, relics of the old world, were good, so it made you make everything perfect, and ignored everything that went wrong until you fought against it.” A pause. “It influences, but it could never plant thoughts in people’s heads. You realised that, Doloran. Wasn’t it why you tried to cast it off?” A few seconds passed before the reply came, and when it did, it was a voice seething with loathing. “Yes. Yeah, that’s how I did it.” Doloran looked away, fingers almost digging into the sand. “I left everyone, I left Alisa, so I could doom the world and yours and kill everyone I was supposed to protect, that’s how I did it! My blame alone, so I- I won’t shed tears over it. I won’t.”

Roland sat down again, and raised his hand to pat the other’s shoulder, hearing a noise in response. “I know how, when and why it all went wrong. I can’t- I can’t question that.” Doloran said, weakly. “But is foolishness such a crime? Does it… warrant for such retribution?”

It didn’t need thinking. “No.” Roland answered. “No, it doesn’t.” “Then what was it that it wanted to punish?” Doloran demanded, his voice loud and bubbling with tears despite the hoarseness. “What did I do wrong? Was abandoning what should be a happy life a error- was pursuing ideals, was living, being , a mistake?” “No.” “We did the best we could- we lived the best we could, and this is our reward? Where not even the tides of history can touch us?” Doloran covered his face. “It hurts so much to think like that, and to think that I wanted to join your crusade just for the sake of spite… So, no, I cannot go with you, not if I am…”

“I don’t see why spite isn’t a good reason to fight.”

The white-haired soulmate looked up. Roland sighed. “You believe in something, or want to achieve something and life isn’t letting you get it- that’s how spite happens. You have a reason you think it’s worth fighting for in spite of all that happens. What is it?” “…” Doloran thought for a while. “I want to honor Naverre’s wishes. An apology.” Roland held his hand out. “That’s a good reason already. Come on.”

His white-haired soulmate nodded, and took his hand, swaying as he stood up. A long trek home…
or maybe even not that. In the end, it was simply a means to not lie down and give up. His newfound family wouldn’t have wanted that, and… his family, wife and son- Lissa and Oscar wouldn’t have wanted that either.

Roland found his arms ring, took out the phone and glanced briefly at the screen. No signal, that was to be expected; always charged, and he slipped it into his pocket after glancing at himself, a few decades older, on the screen.

It was for a happier end, that’s all.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah... that happened. I tried to foreshadow it with that bit in part 2 of the Horned One battle, that bit in dream Allegoria, what Lofty said about there only being the mind left in chapter 97, the fact that Noumenia stores a bit of the Horned One's energy and basically Doloran being a Kingmaker once, but I guess it didn't work as well as I hoped it to.

Thank you for reading Chapter 107! I actually had a lot of difficulty deciding how the fic would end, since y'know, there's Doloran and it doesn't seem like a deus ex machina would work unlike Hydropolis. I even entertained the idea of a body swap once but, well, you can see what I settled on, in the end. It's definitely not the best and I'm not exactly satisfied but ah well, it's the best I can do. Anyway, final chapter coming up!

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1/9/2019 update: Something to listen to after you've read it all
“Welcome back, Mileniyah.” “Senturi.”

As always, she stepped out of the gate, and with a wave, Senturi closed it. “This one needed a lot more interference than the last few, it seems like.” “Yes. It was one of the more anomalous worlds; a time shift, to be specific.” “That is… the displacement of a person in the timeline, isn’t it?” “Full marks.” Mileniyah didn’t have to see beyond Senturi’s veil to note her sudden silence. “My apologies, you’ve tired of such speech a long time ago.” “No, no- I was simply trying to remember. How many instances of that has happened?” “Twenty thousand, four hundred and fifty one, including this one.” Mileniyah replied off of the top of her head. “But yes, it needed much interference. The king replaced the kingmaker, and information had to be slowly fed, or else it would be too much, as I found. Took a few overwrites to get it right.”

Senturi dragged over two chairs, and they sat down. “So what will happen now?” Mileniyah closed her eyes and massaged them. “I do not know. With the otherworlder removed, I cannot access the world beyond that point of time, so.” She shrugged. “I’ve done what I can. If fate exists, then they will be guided, I suppose.” “Mileniyah…”

Before long, she felt arms wrap around her, and she took comfort in that. “Fate will guide them, I trust.” Senturi whispered. “For she is no entity but the bonds weaved together from the threads of the distant past. And she guides us, too, while we search for a path forward.” Only a true shrine maiden could talk like that, for so many times, after so long… “Even though the old gods have abandoned us?” “Yes.” It was a habit, yes, but she was always so very genuine.

They stayed like that for a few minutes, then Mileniyah realised the tower they were in was too quiet. A lyre would be echoing in the tower. “The men- they’re still not back?” “No. Shall I summon them? You still need Singul to archive your findings, after all.” “No need. Boddy’s prophecy is still one of the only common points in every world.” Ever since she found out the woman had future sight, she had made it a point to find her. Work as an assistant, and get a confirmation about the future; and it made it much easier for contact since Evermore was bound to visit. “They prefer to take in the sights and life that should’ve been our future, after all.”

Mileniyah looked up, past the rows and rows of bookshelves of records, beyond the glass ceiling of the silver tower, where the sun always hung in the sky and the clouds never covered up the irritating blue sky or the floating continents a distance away, where blades of grass would’ve been suspended in nothing. Allegoria, a nation raised into the skies by the Sorcerer Queen so that it could escape all the terrible happenings on the surface, but couldn’t outrun time slowly creeping to a stop, and finally, on the ninth day of the third month, eighteen years after its founding and thirty years after the Break, the fourteenth chime of the sundial never came. It was only natural they would tire of such monotony…

The thought prompted her to stand up, and Senturi did as well. “Mileniyah…” “I’m sorry. I have to keep going.” If Dekkah was here, he would say that they had all the time in the world. It was why they didn’t get along, in the end. Mileniyah turned to face Senturi, and pressed her forehead to the latter’s. “Her Majesty poured the last of her life, left over from the old gods, into this tower so that we can have a chance at restoring our time- that’s why I must continue fighting.” She, too, had said this many times. It was their way of reminding each other of their purpose. “For our happy ending, to finally die of old age like our counterparts.”
Senturi closed her eyes. “Then I will pray for your safe return, as always.” “If I were ever in
danger, I would escape back here, wouldn’t I?” “Exactly. I will pray for the world gate to open
smoothly.” “Heh…” Mileniyah stepped back. “If Singul doesn’t get back by the time I leave, remind
him to deal with the archives.”

She could remember the happenings during the otherworlder’s breach like the back of her hand,
and for the next world, she would watch from the shadows once again. The details mattered not,
why the breach happened mattered not, either: as long as the key events happened, one more thread
would be added. Then, one day, the strings of fate would draw on their world, and time would flow
again.

After all, if the Break occurring in every world was the cause of their world, the crux of all,
stopping, then surely, resolving every world and bringing them to a united ending would be the key
to reversing that, and they could all proceed beyond that happy ending.

“I’ll be home soon, Senturi.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading Chapter 108, and an even bigger thanks for everyone who has
put up with me and my writing shenanigans thus far! I have to admit, I've never written
something beyond two thousand words(and that's for essays lol), so 150k? that's really
all thanks to you. To think this fic started basically on the thought of 'hey, if Doloran
likes furries so much, why not make him a furry', and spiralled out into this entire
thing... lmao. I hope the fic was a satisfactory read, and on the occasion it didn't, I do
apologize, it's a pretty rough first attempt ngl.

Anyway a bit of a quip on Mileniyah and the rest: yes, I'm implying Boddly's prediction
of their future is the canon version, and yes, they've probably combed through almost a
million timelines by now.

As much as I want to wrap up the lore I have for the AU, school's starting(again) with
even more holiday time spent on on-site training and I'm starting to run out of
juice(again), so I don't really have a much better alternative apart from hinting at as
much stuff as I can. Some of the lore already in the fic is referenced on what I know
from the DLC, so yeah, there's probably some hints there. So, yeah! If there's any
questions about this fic etc., fire them away! I'll still be very happy to respond. I might
post some of the art I did for this fic here so people don't have to go to the tumblr blog
which has been left to collect dust for a while now, but I'm not really sure if there's any
ao3 rules on that. I'll check back on that another time.

In any case, thank you again, and have a great time!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!