

The Ashen Crown

Written by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(NOTE: All roles are and may be played by any ethnicity)

RYLIKVAR: Female. Rebel scum.

GASCOIGNE: Male. Her younger page.

LYSTRIAL: Female. Queen of Io Luciae.

INAHO: Female. Queen of Pridalsha.

ASTRAEA: Female. Servant of God.

SETTING:

The City of Sutch, in southeast Pridalsha.

TIME:

Present.

CONTENT WARNING:

Graphic violence.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

NAMES:

RYLIKVAR NARR: ['ɹɪ-lɪk-vɑɪ nɑɪ]

LYSTRIAL NOVIKSTOL: ['lɪ-stɹi-əl 'no-vɪk-,stɔl]

INAHO: [ɪ-'na-hɔ]

ASTRAEA: [æ-'stɹɛ-jɑ]

GASCOIGNE: ['gæs-kɔɪn]

NITO PALUUR: ['ni-tɔ pa-'lʊə]

LOCATIONS:

SUTCH: [sʊtʃ]

IO LUCIAE: ['a-jɔ 'lu-ʃɪ-ɛ]

PRIDALSHA: [pɹɪ-'dɑl-ʃɑ]

THE LANGUAGE OF GOD:

As for this...it is a tongue known only by the Devout. Any inquiries must be referred to ASTRAEA.

*“From ashes I came
To ashes, I’ll return.
But tonight I’m content
To sit here and burn.”*

-C.b. Roberts

ACT I

Darkness.

*A deep bell/singing bowl, calm, meditative,
healing, chimes without urgency.*

Then, a voice:

ASTRAEA (V.O.)

There is not a god alive remains uninvoked in the name of bloodletting.

Power. Coin. Flesh.

The desires of men have wrought a scourge upon this earth, molding peace into nothing but a far and fabled dream.

But fear not, I say unto you. For my God walks with me.

And He longs for the world that once He made.

*The bell gives way to the sound of
warhorns.*

*The clashing of swords and shields. Battle
and destruction. Death.*

Flame.

Screams.

It peaks and fades.

Silence.

*Sunlight reveals what remains of Sutch. Its
plant life and farmlands burned to the
ground some years ago, and consists now
mostly of charred ground and dead trees.*

An empty pond.

Debris.

Ash.

*RYLIKVAR stands amid the dereliction,
taking in what's left of the once lively city.*

*Behind her, at some brand of attention,
stands GASCOIGNE.*

*It seems as if they have been here for
some time.*

Silence.

RYLIKVAR

I have to ask, do you plan on standing there, brooding in silence the entire time?

GASCOIGNE

What would you have me say?

RYLIKVAR

Say what you will. I care not what. I'm merely suggesting if you are going stand there with that dull-witted look on your face, perhaps do it a little farther towards our periphery.

GASCOIGNE

Is there a minimum distance you would prefer, miss?

RYLIKVAR

(Laughing)

No, I shall let you be the judge.

I do grant you. It must be queer for you. Being back.

It gives me pause too.

GASCOIGNE

It's not that.

RYLIKVAR

No?

GASCOIGNE

This place feels...wrong. Now. I do not like it.

RYLIKVAR

Are you scared?

GASCOIGNE

Yes.

RYLIKVAR

Ever the coward, aren't you?

Look around. It's not as if anything here can hurt you, boy. Worst thing to happen shall be you trip and get your clothes dirty.

GASCOIGNE

Yes.

RYLIKVAR

Gascoigne.

Take no veracity in the stories of the men. They are just that. Stories.

If the dead wanted to ravage us do you not think they would have done as much by now?

GASCOIGNE

Not according to the stories.

RYLIKVAR

Fair enough.

They shall be here soon. Leave me.

GASCOIGNE

Yes, miss.

GASCOIGNE exits.

RYLIKVAR continues to take in the ambience.

ASTRAEA enters leisurely in the background.

Or perhaps she has been there all along, blended into the scene, and we have not noticed her until now.

Either way, she is...disquieting.

Perhaps it's the blue-hooded cloak she wears or the odd pendant she fingers around her neck.

Perhaps it's the worn bag over her shoulder, made of material bags shouldn't be made of.

Perhaps it's her eyes.

We can't see them, for she's wrapped several blue bandages over her face, obscuring the upper half.

She is blind.

Yet she's staring right at RYLIKVAR.

Smiling.

But RYLIKVAR doesn't see ASTRAEA.

*She just kneels and grabs a handful of ash
from the ground.*

Lets it fall slowly through her fingers.

Stares at the imprint left behind.

ASTRAEA exits, still unseen.

*Whether RYLIKVAR has sensed her and
turns to see nothing is up to her.*

*GASCOIGNE enters, followed by
LYSTRIAL.*

GASCOIGNE

Queen Lystrial Novikstol. Of Io Luciae.

LYSTRIAL

Thank you, dear boy.

GASCOIGNE exits.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Your Majesty. You came.

LYSTRIAL

Strange how your invitation left little choice.

You look different than the woman my mind had conjured.

RYLIKVAR

You do not. You are beautiful.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

I thought we had agreed to leave attendants behind?

RYLIKVAR

Oh, you would not count Gascoigne as an attendant, would you?

LYSTRIAL

A page is a page.

RYLIKVAR

True, but I am sure you have heard of our arrangement. He's quite harmless to you.
Trust me.

LYSTRIAL

Hmm.

RYLIKVAR

It is nice to finally meet you, Lys. You do go by "Lys?"

LYSTRIAL

To my friends. I would prefer my proper title in your case, Rylikvar Narr. Have I pronounced that correctly?

RYLIKVAR

Oh, come, there's no need to be curt.

LYSTRIAL

No.

RYLIKVAR

We are to be friends soon enough, Queen Lystrial Novikstol, of Io Luciae, surely we might approach today with a bit more amiability?

LYSTRIAL

We surely may. But my respect is not yours until you have earned it.

RYLIKVAR

I see.

You have earned my men's. On the battlefield? They say you dance. Like you are at a masque instead of a melee.

LYSTRIAL

Do they?

RYLIKVAR

They say you are mesmerizing. What I would not give to see it myself. Have a taste of that little blade of yours before we lay them down. We have time.

LYSTRIAL

Are you proposing we begin peace negotiations with a duel?

RYLIKVAR

Friendly sparring. Why not? Might I earn your respect if I bested you in single combat? You will admit, your reputation does precede you.

LYSTRIAL

As does yours.

RYLIKVAR

(Offering her hand)

Thank you for coming.

LYSTRIAL

(Not taking it)

I shall never bow to you.

RYLIKVAR

I shall never ask you to.

We do not want the lands of Io Luciae. None but our own.

LYSTRIAL

My dead soldiers suggest otherwise.

RYLIKVAR

We are fighting for our freedom. I shall not apologize for what I have done to your men in name of that pursuit, but know truly, I have no wish to subjugate them. Or you. Even if Inaho has convinced you otherwise.

LYSTRIAL

She needs not convince me of anything. I have seen your atrocities with mine own eyes. You call them justice?

RYLIKVAR

I call them a war. Justice begets atrocity, Your Highness. You have slaughtered as many of mine as I have of yours.

LYSTRIAL

I doubt that.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

My men, they love their stories. You are a favorite subject.

LYSTRIAL

I am delighted your men find me so interesting.

RYLIKVAR

As do I. Every kingdom, every other nation in the Realms, they wanted nothing to do with Pridalsha's little "civil dispute." Did they?

No one except you.

You are here. Fighting by her side.

Why is that?

You know how stories are, but...

Is it true?

LYSTRIAL says nothing.

GASCOIGNE enters, followed by INAHO.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

We were just speaking of you, My Queen.

INAHO spits.

(Seriously, hawk that fucker right onstage.)

RYLIKVAR

Pleasure to see you again.

GASCOIGNE

Queen Inaho Sani--

INAHO

We know who we are, boy.

Out of everywhere in our kingdom, you called to negotiate here?

RYLIKVAR

I figured the nostalgia would be a boon to us.

INAHO

You insolent girl.

RYLIKVAR draws her sword.

INAHO immediately draws hers in response.

RYLIKVAR

Come again?

LYSTRIAL

Hold! Ho!

RYLIKVAR

Call me girl again.

INAHO

You do but prove our point.

LYSTRIAL

Lower your weapons!

RYLIKVAR

Forgive me, I only thought it seemed fitting. End the war where it began? Do you not think the place peaceful?

INAHO

Perhaps before you burned it to the ground.

RYLIKVAR

Oh, it still has its charms, I should wager. I, myself, find an uncanny allure in the scene left behind. That pervading stillness in the air. Listen.

I call that peaceful.

INAHO

Tell us why we should not slay you where you stand.

RYLIKVAR

Could you?

LYSTRIAL

HOLD!

We are here to negotiate a peace! For the sake of our people. All of them.

I would not see this day end in bloodshed, we have seen enough as it is. Lower your weapons.

Now.

RYLIKVAR and INAHO lower and sheathe their swords.

LYSTRIAL

Let us begin.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Gascoigne.

GASCOIGNE takes a weathered map out of his pack.

He crosses and hands it to RYLIKVAR.

INAHO

We see you also elected to ignore our accord to leave attendants behind.

RYLIKVAR

Of all people, My Queen, I thought you would make an exception for him.

INAHO

Yes, your "arrangement," you call it?

RYLIKVAR

He wanted to see his childhood home. How could I deny him that?

INAHO

You would do better, boy, to grow a backbone and kill her already.

RYLIKVAR

(To GASCOIGNE)

It would save her a lot of trouble.

(Pause, perhaps a glance to
INAHO in between)

Go keep watch now.

GASCOIGNE

Yes, miss.

GASCOIGNE exits.

RYLIKVAR

Shall we?

The women gather and seat themselves.

*RYLIKVAR lays the map out on the ground
before them.*

*LYSTRIAL and INAHO take hands and
look to RYLIKVAR, waiting.*

RYLIKVAR

(Seeing them)

Oh, come now, really?

INAHO

Unlike you, we are not heathens. We shall proceed as is the custom.

RYLIKVAR

Heathens? It's funny, I have never heard the Gods call me a heathen, only the people who believe in them.

LYSTRIAL

Humor us, then. Would you? If we are to be friends soon enough?

Beat.

RYLIKVAR takes LYSTRIAL'S hand.

And then INAHO'S.

LYSTRIAL

Do you know the words?

RYLIKVAR

Yes, I know the words.

The women begin a prayer.

ALL

Gods of the Realms. We lift out our voices. Hear us as we cry. We invoke the rite of Sanctuary. No harm shall here be done with your blessings upon us. Protect these proceedings and watch o'er us with your favor. Guide our hands with your light. And let surrender come only when peace reigns high again. It has been said. Now let it be so.

Beat.

INAHO

Here is how this shall go.

RYLIKVAR

I accept your surrender.

Beat.

INAHO

Excuse us?

RYLIKVAR

I accept your surrender.

That is why we're here, is it not?

INAHO

(Overlapping)

Where do you find the gall to speak with such impudence?!

RYLIKVAR

(Overlapping)

Where do you to act like you are the one in control?!

LYSTRIAL

Peace.

RYLIKVAR

No, a moment.

(To INAHO)

You accepted my invitation here. Both of you did. So somewhere beneath that regal, pompous exterior of yours you must realize the gravity of the situation. You are not winning this war. I am. I am winning and you are not. Now I understand your reluctance to accept that. If the situation were reversed, I should feel the same. But it is not reversed. You have not the luxury to pretend it is. So here is how this shall go.

You are a shit queen. People think I can do better. I agree with them.

But we do not want your kingdom. We want our own. Free from yours. Shall I tell you which part you are going to give us? My Queen?

Beat.

INAHO can only laugh.

INAHO

None of it.

We shall allow you your droll tantrum, Rylikvar. But you are our people. Our subjects. Just because the section of our kingdom you happen to reside in is unhappy, you have no right to call it your own.

RYLIKVAR

(Overlapping)

Unhappy? Is that what you call starving people? Unhappy?

INAHO

(Overlapping)

You have no right!

RYLIKVAR

I have every right! How many times had you even set foot in this city before I burned it down? Hmm?! You may own these farms and fields in name, but you have not worked them. You did not build them. You inherited what we have given our lives to sow. Because you somehow managed enough fortune to find yourself born in a castle instead of a shack. You must tell me how you did it.

LYSTRIAL

Rylikvar.

INAHO

It's all right. We thank you, Lys, but her sardonicism has little sting after all this time.

RYLIKVAR

If you have to keep telling yourself that.

INAHO

On the contrary, what we have to keep telling you is that YOU FORGET YOUR PLACE!

We own you. No matter your feelings, no matter your beliefs, we own you. And if we must search out and extinguish every last one of you rebels to put you back into line, so be it. You do not get to start a war just because you feel overworked.

You are winning today. That is not a war won.

RYLIKVAR

Then we shall fight until it is. Our yearning dies not as people do.

INAHO

Not yet.

RYLIKVAR

Strike me down...another would simply rise in my place.

INAHO

Should you like, we can test that theory.

LYSTRIAL

Do not draw.

Either of you.

INAHO

Tell us, shall we show you what it's like to really starve?

LYSTRIAL

ENOUGH!

We are leaders of kingdoms.

RYLIKVAR

Or shall be soon.

LYSTRIAL

For the sake of the Gods, let us act like them. If we cannot be civil throughout a single dialogue, then hope of peace is truly lost. For there is not a rational head in the Realms that could entertain the thought of us living in harmony, much less one day working alongside one another.

(To RYLIKVAR)

You desire your own territory? It means holding at least a modicum of cordial respect for those in the ones next to you. Have we seen that?

We have no obligation to like one another. But we must live with one another. Lest this carnage overtake us all. If rather someone disagrees with that ideal, I suggest they depart now.

Nobody moves.

LYSTRIAL

Good.

(To RYLIKVAR, pointing to the map)

Stake your claim.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

(Showing on the map)

Here.

Everything east...of that line. Sutch and its drying river will become Pridalsha's eastern border. All the way to the sea. What say you?

It's not even a third of your land.

Beat.

But before INAHO responds, an object hits a nearby tree behind them all at some speed.

The women turn, surprised at the sudden sound.

RYLIKVAR hops up and crosses to it.

Stares at it.

LYSTRIAL

What is it?

RYLIKVAR

It's a red burglar.

It's dead.

RYLIKVAR picks up and shows the others what can now be discerned as a dead cardinal, its bones crushed from impact with the tree.

She turns it over and holds it by the wing, entranced.

Disturbed.

All three of them are.

So much so that they haven't noticed GASCOIGNE, who has returned.

GASCOIGNE

(Perhaps clearing his throat, to RYLIKVAR)

Excuse me--Miss?

(To LYSTRIAL and INAHO)

My Queens?

RYLIKVAR

What is it, boy?

GASCOIGNE

(Staring at the bird)

Um...

RYLIKVAR

Gascoigne.

GASCOIGNE

Um, there's...a woman. At the pass. She says you are expecting her.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR
What?

INAHO
Is this another one of your tricks?

RYLIKVAR
I know nothing of this. You?

INAHO
No.

RYLIKVAR and INAHO look to LYSTRIAL.

Also no.

LYSTRIAL
(To GASCOIGNE)
She said that exact phrase? That we were expecting her?

GASCOIGNE
Yes, Your Majesty. I told her she must be mistaken, but--she's insistent.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL
How would she know of this meeting?

INAHO
She would not.
(To RYLIKVAR)
Unless one of us told someone.

RYLIKVAR
My Queen, show me some faith. If I was going to ambush you I would have done it already.

I have told no one but Gascoigne, here.

INAHO
(To GASCOIGNE)
From what kingdom doth she hail, boy?

GASCOIGNE
She would say nothing, My Queen. She just insisted that she speak with you. That it was a matter of the utmost importance.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR
Well, My Queens, I know not your thoughts, but I have given none of my own to a precedent for this situation.

I shall admit, my curiosity is piqued.

INAHO

Ours too. But we like it not.

RYLIKVAR

So you would not hear her?

INAHO

This is neither the time nor the place, would you not agree?

RYLIKVAR

For negotiation, you mean?

INAHO

You know what we mean, Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR

I know not. You keep saying "we" when I think you mean to say "I." It is confusing.

LYSTRIAL

(To RYLIKVAR, perhaps
putting an arm in front of
INAHO)

Stop talking.

(To GASCOIGNE)

Gascoigne?

GASCOIGNE

Yes! Your--Majesty.

LYSTRIAL

It's all right.

Did you attempt to ascertain her purpose? What it is that she has to say?

GASCOIGNE

She would not say.

LYSTRIAL

All right. Tell us, then. What do you make of her?

Beat.

GASCOIGNE

She makes me uncomfortable.

LYSTRIAL

Would you feel comfortable sending her away?

ASTRAEA

Would you do that after I have come all this way?

All seems to go quiet as everyone turns to see ASTRAEA, having entered unseen.

Her "uncomforting" features have not diminished since her last appearance, and her visage and air take everyone aback.

INAHO

That depends on what you have come all this way for.

We are expecting you, are we?

ASTRAEA

You will forgive me, My Queens, I hope, a small falsehood in effort to reach you. As well as my subsequent intrusion. I feared I would not arrive before the conclusion of your talks.

LYSTRIAL

And how is it, exactly, you are familiar with our purpose here?

ASTRAEA

God walks with me, Queen Lystrial. He tells me all things.

INAHO

God?

We must say, lies and cryptic answers are not an opportune way to make a first impression.

ASTRAEA

Of course. You are right, Your Grace. Please forgive me. I offer my sincerest apologies.

I am called Lady Astraea. I represent a small denomination of worship in the northwest reaches of your kingdom. And I have traveled far over many eves to take part in your peace negotiations.

Beat.

INAHO can only laugh.

INAHO

Tell us--tell us, what force in the Realms makes you believe you are welcome here?

ASTRAEA

My presence here is vital.

INAHO

Is it?

LYSTRIAL

That's a striking pendant.

ASTRAEA

Thank you, Your Majesty.

LYSTRIAL

I can say not I have ever seen its like.

INAHO

Lystrial.

LYSTRIAL

But I have, to think of it, heard its like described.

Your denomination. Might I ask its name?

ASTRAEA

We have none, Your Grace. Collectively, we strive to live without such bondage.

LYSTRIAL

They call you the Devout. Do they not?

ASTRAEA

Others have, yes.

INAHO

(To LYSTRIAL)

You have heard of these people?

LYSTRIAL

Very little. Rumors.

(To ASTRAEA)

They say you are fanatics.

ASTRAEA

And they say you relish perversion, Queen. Rumors are just so. It is not the utterance of words that makes a reality, but our actions. We simply believe in a single God. Apart from that, we are no different.

INAHO

So you...Devout feel you have a right to attend these negotiations? You would understand, of course, if Pridalsha wished to deal with one secession at a time?

ASTRAEA

Oh, My Queen, you misunderstand me. We have no intentions toward secession. Our only desire is to assist you in these negotiations. And humbly offer our advice for the benefit of Pridalsha in the days to come.

INAHO

And why should we require your assistance? Are we not a queen? Can we not rule our kingdom by ourselves?

ASTRAEA

Of course you can. But every ruler needs an adviser.

We have advisers.

INAHO

Present?

ASTRAEA

If I may be so bold--

You have certainly been enough already.

INAHO

(Brief Pause)

No adviser you may have might compare with me. I was chosen by my people through a rigorous process of selection.

ASTRAEA

Rigorous?

RYLIKVAR

You have bandages over your face.

I do? I did not see them. Thank you for alerting me.

ASTRAEA

You are blind.

RYLIKVAR

Is that a problem?

ASTRAEA

You tell us.

RYLIKVAR

Beat.

Your concern is appreciated, Rylikvar Narr, but I assure you, my physical impairment does not impede my cognitive functions.

ASTRAEA

So you say. But I wager her advisers can at least walk down a hallway.

RYLIKVAR

I suppose you will just have to take my word that I am capable of the task.

ASTRAEA

You might put that bird down, by the way.

Everyone looks to see that RYLIKVAR is still indeed, holding the dead bird.

Filthy thing, you want not to catch something.

ASTRAEA

The air shifts as RYLIKVAR returns it to the ground.

INAHO

You are an amusing diversion, Astraea.

ASTRAEA

Lady Astraea.

INAHO

Leave. Now. Without incident, while you still can.

ASTRAEA

I must beg you to reconsider, My Queen. You will have great need of what I know.

INAHO

Go.

ASTRAEA

You will have great need of me.

INAHO

Now.

ASTRAEA

Please.

INAHO

Are you deaf as well? Go!

ASTRAEA does not move.

INAHO draws her sword.

LYSTRIAL

Inaho.

ASTRAEA

(Not moving)

I have coin.

INAHO

(Drawing closer)

We shall not tell you again.

ASTRAEA

Tell me what it would take.

LYSTRIAL

Inaho.

ASTRAEA

There must be something I might do to convince you.

INAHO places her sword at ASTRAEA'S throat.

INAHO

You will leave now. Or you will die upon our blade.

ASTRAEA

And you will break your Sanctuary with the slaughter of a well-meaning stranger.

Your Grace, Rylikvar set your city ablaze. But did you know that she made certain her little page boy's father would be caught in the holocaust? Did you know she killed him on purpose?

GASCOIGNE didn't.

ASTRAEA

She never kills without premeditation. That eager violence, it is an arousal for her. She needs it to function, without it she knows not who she is. Countering that takes a different type of warfare, My Queen, as much as I admire the practice of your own interrogations. I shall admit, you yourself craft a marvelous handiwork. How you manage to keep her men alive for so long? And even after you told Queen Lystrial you would stop?

O, and I could fill pages with the dark secrets she keeps from you both.

My intent in divulging these personal matters is not to sow discord or enrage, but to show you a mere fraction of what I know. We have all done terrible things. That is no matter now. For I am here to prevent more of them.

My Queen, I cannot stress enough the importance of your next action. God tells me all things. And I know not only everything there is to know, but everything that is to come. Today might end in jubilation. But without my guidance, surely none of you will see the light of tomorrow's dawn.

Break not your Sanctuary.

Beat.

INAHO

Go.

Beat.

ASTRAEA

Very well.

ASTRAEA steps back from INAHO and her sword.

She takes her bag and places it on the ground.

ASTRAEA

Should a time come that you desire my return...there is a bell in my satchel. All you need do is ring it.

ASTRAEA exits.

The air shifts.

No one knows exactly what to say.

RYLIKVAR

Well.

That was a fair amount of new information.

Lystrial, it might--it might be best if you told us of these rumors that you have heard.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

Right.

A bell chimes without urgency as the lights begin to fade.

It is joined by a gradually enveloping, undecipherable chant. Perhaps sung by one person, perhaps a choir of a hundred. It contains many influences. Tibetan. Arabian. Gregorian. African. Sea Shanties. Eldritch.

It, too, moves without urgency.

More bells now. Temple, shipping, clock tower.

All this and more underscores what is to come.

After it has taken root, LYSTRIAL'S voice:

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

I know little. And what of it is truth, I know even less. But this is what I have heard.

A dumbshow begins.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

In the darker harbors of Io Luciae, there are several where it is known some of my more disreputable subjects gather.

Light illuminates RYLIKVAR and INAHO, acting as some of the "disreputable subjects." They unload crates from a ship.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

Before the war, when time permitted, I made it a habit to visit them. To meet with their occupants in their home environment. Learn from them, if I might. Understand what I might do to improve their livelihoods.

LYSTRIAL appears, acting as herself, with GASCOIGNE in tow, acting as her page.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

I was greeted on occasion with decorum.

INAHO sees LYSTRIAL and bows.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

On others I was not.

RYLIKVAR hits INAHO, gives her a look, and promptly gives LYSTRIAL an obscene gesture.

RYLIKVAR, INAHO, and GASCOIGNE disappear.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

But I made these rounds nonetheless.

It was near the culmination of one of these visits when I happened upon two gentlemen drinking in a tavern off the docks.

RYLIKVAR and INAHO reappear, acting as the "gentlemen."

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

They were swapping stories and tall tales, as men are wont to do in the depths of drink. And I asked if they might allow me the pleasure of joining them.

LYSTRIAL does so.

And the men do so.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

Our stories were rudimentary. More fluff and spectacle than any substance. But they filled us with verve and the occasional spook, so we found ourselves content from the time. And as it crawled by, as one tale bled into the next, one of the gentlemen turned our discourse to that of more troubling protagonists.

Nito Paluur.

GASCOIGNE reappears, alone, now acting as "Nito Paluur."

His arms lay open in front of him, held in supplication.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

A familiar name. If you know nothing of my kingdom's history, still you have heard of him. Paluur the Preposterous. Batshit Boy. The Metastasized Child. The boy who tore out his own eyes and ate his family whole. Of course, there are countless theories as to why he did it, but it is doubtful we shall ever know the truth.

The harbor gentleman, however, was of the adamant opinion that the reason was the Devout.

ASTRAEA appears, acting as a member of "the Devout."

Or herself.

Over the following, slowly or in one fell swoop, she removes the bandages from her face.

Her eyes are mesmerizing.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

In the fateful months before the deeds, Nito somehow, somewhere must have happened upon a servant of the Devout. Or they happened upon him.

By some manner of ill chance, they found him. Talked with him. Or something perhaps more sinister.

ASTRAEA crosses behind GASCOIGNE.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

They did something to him. Showed him something or told him something. Something that his sanity could just not withstand.

ASTRAEA places the bandages over GASCOIGNE'S eyes.

Whispers into his ear.

He begins slowly raising his hands to his eyes.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

"I know little," the gentleman said. "And what of it is truth, I know even less. But this is what I have heard. That amongst the whispers of the dark, the Devout are the whispers darker still. That they work in the shadows of the shadows to prepare for their God's return. An entity that they say slumbers somewhere beyond all comprehension. Resting. Waiting. To come back.

Say what you will of Nito. But..."

GASCOIGNE'S palms close violently over his eyes.

He rips them out.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

"People do not do such things."

GASCOIGNE runs to LYSTRIAL, INAHO, and RYLIKVAR.

Attacks them.

Eats them.

LYSTRIAL (V.O.)

"Not even the insane. Not without being prompted somehow."

ASTRAEA watches as GASCOIGNE eats the women.

Perhaps the chant intensifies before it stops.

Silence.

Except for the sounds coming from GASCOIGNE.

Suddenly, he stops and looks at ASTRAEA.

Beat.

He runs off and disappears into the darkness.

ASTRAEA turns from the carnage to the audience.

She shares a moment with us.

Then turns and disappears into the darkness.

Silence.

The lights slowly rise as LYSTRIAL finishes the story, banishing the world of the dumbshow.

We are back in Sutch.

LYSTRIAL

They found Paluur in his families' stables, his face caved so far into his skull you might use it as a bowl. He had tried to eat his horse.

I know not the intentions of these people. But if these Devout have such power, if they might...bring about such things as that, then that woman is followed by some iller fortune. And she spoke of things that she should know not.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Or our secrets are simply more poorly kept than we think.

It must be some form of trick or ruse.

INAHO

For what reason? Why?

RYLIKVAR does not have an immediate answer to that.

LYSTRIAL

As intrigued as I am by the things she said...perhaps it would be best to lay her more revelatory statements aside for the moment? Until the business at hand is concluded?

RYLIKVAR

But what now is the business at hand?

How does this Astraea affect our matter? What happens now?

Inaho?

What say you?

Do you believe her?

INAHO

We know not.

RYLIKVAR

At last we agree.

Nor I.

LYSTRIAL

Nor I.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

RYLIKVAR

Indeed.

INAHO

But is she an enemy? Or just a lunatic?

RYLIKVAR

Are those mutually exclusive?

LYSTRIAL

Whoever she is, the fact remains. She has threatened our lives. According to her, without her involvement we shall be dead by morning. That is an enemy to me. And I, for one, have no resolve to leave my people without their queen.

INAHO

Nor we.

RYLIKVAR

Nor I.

So again. What happens now?

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

I would move...for the time being...that we cease all troops. All action. Until we might reconvene these talks at a later date, after time has been spent to investigate these people. I like not knowing little about my enemies.

INAHO

We would second that motion.

RYLIKVAR

You--...

LYSTRIAL

Do you feel differently?

RYLIKVAR

What would you have me tell my people? How far away is this later date?

LYSTRIAL

Just until we might learn what we are dealing with.

RYLIKVAR

So you know not?

LYSTRIAL

I cannot put an exact measure to it, but I would say as soon as possible.

RYLIKVAR

You would say?

INAHO

What issue have you with this?

RYLIKVAR

My issue--

We have an opportunity. This stranger has given us an opportunity. We might unite. Let us finish now. If we postpone...you both have land to go back to. Resources to work with. If I return and tell my people we are halting our cause, the status quo is the same. It is worse! You achieve your goal with these talks while I fail in mine.

LYSTRIAL

The goal of achieving peace?

RYLIKVAR

Of fucking freedom, Lystrial!

If I stop...what reason have you to return?

LYSTRIAL

Diplomacy.

RYLIKVAR

Because we have been so diplomatic to date!

LYSTRIAL

Then perhaps we start!

RYLIKVAR

I remember not, do I not have to be recognized as a kingdom first?!

LYSTRIAL

You would have us fight each other yet?!

RYLIKVAR

Gods be damned, this is a war, is it not?!

INAHO

Rylikvar!

If we give you our land. We fail in our goal.

RYLIKVAR

Yes, Your Majesty, that is how conflict works. So shall we not come to a compromise? Now, while we are here?

INAHO

Then the whole purpose of postponing the talks is negated.

We need to know more of this woman. Her kind. Until then, we shall say no more.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Then I can promise nothing.

I shall give you what I can. In the name of diplomacy.

RYLIKVAR moves to exit.

LYSTRIAL

Rylikvar.

Rylikvar!

RYLIKVAR stops.

LYSTRIAL

We just need more time. To learn.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

If the woman means me ill, it makes no difference what I learn.

An enemy is an enemy. My Queens.

LYSTRIAL

We have not broken Sanctuary.

RYLIKVAR

Are we at peace?

Come, boy.

RYLIKVAR exits, GASCOIGNE reluctantly in tow.

Silence.

INAHO

Would you walk with me, my friend?

LYSTRIAL

Of course.

The lights fade.

END OF ACT I.

ACT II

A miscellany of sounds in the darkness: young girls laughing/playing, the clash of steel, ships on the sea, whinnying horses, more. It is not necessarily calm, but it is certainly not cacophonous.

Not yet.

It builds to that point.

It twists. Distorts. Becomes perverted.

At its peak, it abruptly stops and light reveals LYSTRIAL and INAHO, making their way through a different section of the forest (though there need not be tremendous effort in differentiating its look, as we'll come to see).

INAHO

You remember nothing else about these people? Anything at all you might have heard outside your harbors?

LYSTRIAL

No. As you might imagine, at the time I considered it nothing but a product of the surroundings. Mere gossip over drink. Exaggerations. Stories.

To see them in the flesh was another matter.

INAHO

Did you not feel a malignant shift in the air? For all her talk of guidance, she seemed to desire a wedge between us.

LYSTRIAL

The cultist or Rylikvar?

INAHO

(Chuckling)

No, Rylikvar's intent is clear yet. This woman...

Upon my return to camp, I shall confer with my historians.

LYSTRIAL

And I mine. I would go so far as to even track down my sailors. In this matter, I think, we should not be adverse to the thoughts of the commonfolk. I know that your--

INAHO

No. I agree. What there is to be found, we shall unearth.

They walk in silence.

They stop.

I am this way, then.
LYSTRIAL

Yes.
INAHO

See you soon.

INAHO turns to go.

She does not get far before:

LYSTRIAL
You would truly make me ask?

Inaho.

I like less knowing little about my friends.

Have you not stopped?

You lied to me.

INAHO
I had determined...that if you were kept in the dark, it would--

LYSTRIAL
You lied to me.

INAHO
The circumstances left me no choice.

LYSTRIAL
You have the choice, Inaho!

INAHO
Her men are a plague upon my kingdom! The entire Realms!

LYSTRIAL
And torturing them is the answer?

INAHO
If it leads to the end of this business--

LYSTRIAL turns away.

INAHO
If it leads to the end of this business faster--

LYSTRIAL

(Turning back around)

It leads not to the end! It makes the business longer. We are grown women now. Why think you still violence should put an end to violence? That lies lead to anything but more--

INAHO

And what lies have you told, Lys?! What dark secrets have you kept from me?!

LYSTRIAL

I keep nothing from you!

Why think you I am here, Inaho?

Beat.

INAHO

I shall not apologize for what I do to secure the safety of my kingdom.

LYSTRIAL scoffs.

INAHO

What?

LYSTRIAL

Nothing. You know, you two are more alike than you think.

(Crossing to INAHO)

Inaho, Gods know what we have all done. I would not have you apologize. But I would have you be better than her. Than more lies. Than...this.

Because I know you are.

(Placing a hand on her cheek)

I do not recognize you as I once did.

You have become something haunting in my eyes. And you linger there with a meanness that hears me not.

Beat.

INAHO

(Breaking away)

It shall be over soon.

LYSTRIAL

You keep saying that, but it never is. It shan't be. Not until you two meet on common ground.

INAHO

There is none.

LYSTRIAL

Then be better. It does not make it right. But it is time you saved people once more.

Beat.

INAHO

You think I should give in to her demands?

LYSTRIAL

I think you, more than either of us, have the power to end this. I know what it means, but...at this stage? Would the harm be so great?

It's not even a third of your land.

Beat.

INAHO

We have ruled as neighbors since we were girls. I think not there is a day goes by I do not compare my reign with yours. You spur me with a rivalry I cherish with all my heart.

But you are smaller than me. Your reach is less. I mean you no slight, it is simply a fact. I have had to deal in my time with more than you, Lys. With people like her.

If I just...if I just give it up? What kind of precedent is set? It may be less than a third today. But tomorrow...tomorrow somebody decides they too are...unsatisfied. And then it is more. Then more. Then half. Then more. And more. Then all. And it is just a matter of time before the rest of my sovereignty has slipped away. Everything I have done. Everything I am. Gone.

You know not what it means. You cannot begin to touch it. You have lived not in what she craves to take away. Owned it. Wandered its secrets and forests since you were a child.

It's mine.

It's mine.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

It is.

But though I would have it so, you are not the only piece on this board. And I fear the wake of our present course shall leave little of it left.

Whatever your choice...Inaho.

I am behind you. You know that?

INAHO

I do.

They are inches from one another.

LYSTRIAL kisses INAHO.

INAHO doesn't reciprocate right away.

Her hesitance is clear.

But she soon gives in, unable to resist any longer.

She returns the kiss.

And the entire affair perhaps lasts a bit longer than it should.

INAHO breaks away.

Silence.

You will bid Norien my best?

How is he?

INAHO

Beat.

Fine. Keeping the ships intact.

Goethe?

LYSTRIAL

The same.

Lys, I--

INAHO

Hush.

LYSTRIAL

Only if for a moment. Let us be.

Beat.

INAHO takes LYSTRIAL'S hand.

LYSTRIAL clutches it.

They share a moment.

Until our next converse.

LYSTRIAL

LYSTRIAL lets go and crosses to exit.

INAHO

Lys.

I shall think on your counsel. Thank you for it.

LYSTRIAL

You are most welcome.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL exits.

INAHO does not move.

*She cannot in the wake of a building, quiet
rage.*

*A sound slowly fades in: A sword, hitting
the bark of a tree.*

Over and over.

Over and over.

Lights fade out on INAHO.

Over and over.

Over and over.

RYLIKVAR grunting.

Over and over.

Over and over.

*Lights rise on RYLIKVAR, in a "different"
section of the forest, repeatedly and
furiously striking a tree with her sword.*

The tree where INAHO was just standing.

GASCOIGNE stands off to the side.

Watching.

Trying not to watch.

Over and over.

Over and over.

Over and over.

Eventually, she stops, exhausted, breathing hard.

This has also perhaps lasted longer than it should have.

RYLIKVAR

Is there any water left?

GASCOIGNE pulls a waterskin from his pack and tosses it to RYLIKVAR.

She opens it and drinks.

A lot of it.

She finishes, wipes her mouth, and tosses it back to GASCOIGNE.

Beat.

She suddenly returns to thwacking the tree.

GASCOIGNE

Miss!

RYLIKVAR

(Instantly relenting)

I'm done! I'm done. I'm--...

Perhaps a final hit or two.

RYLIKVAR

She was...so close. She was just about to relent, I--

Maybe not. Maybe I'm just--imagining.

GASCOIGNE stares at RYLIKVAR.

RYLIKVAR notices.

RYLIKVAR

I shall be fine, boy. Do not fret.

GASCOIGNE

I had more concern for the tree.

RYLIKVAR chuckles.

RYLIKVAR

That was good.

Something on your mind.

How could you tell?
GASCOIGNE

Beat.

I concede, the woman's remarks...it was my hope that was information you would never have to learn.
RYLIKVAR

You killed my father on purpose?
GASCOIGNE

It was more of a two birds, one stone situation. Happy accident. But yes.
RYLIKVAR

You knew him?
GASCOIGNE

Yes, you could say that. Intimately.
RYLIKVAR

Why?
GASCOIGNE

Our paths crossed.
RYLIKVAR

Why did you kill him?
GASCOIGNE

Beat.

That, I shall tell you when you're older.
RYLIKVAR

Tell me now. Why?
GASCOIGNE

No.
RYLIKVAR

Did he do something to you?
GASCOIGNE

No.
RYLIKVAR

Did he rape you?
GASCOIGNE

RYLIKVAR
(Not lying, almost laughing at
the idea)

No. He did not rape me.

GASCOIGNE
Then why? He must have done something.

RYLIKVAR
Why must he have done something?

GASCOIGNE
Because you do not kill someone without a reason!

RYLIKVAR
Oh, I had a reason.

But some reasons, Gascoigne, we have not the wherewithal to understand until we're older.

If you insist, I will tell you some day. I promise.

Beat.

GASCOIGNE
She said it's an arousal for you.

You did not have a reason. You just enjoy it.

*RYLIKVAR suddenly tosses her sword
towards GASCOIGNE, handle first.*

*He moves away from it, almost
instinctively, and the sword falls to the
ground.*

Beat.

RYLIKVAR
Pick it up.

You want to talk of reasons? How many winters, let us say, has it been? How many have covered our fields in powder and frost since you first crawled into my camp? Begged me to take you into my service?

Come. I know you know.

GASCOIGNE
Four.

RYLIKVAR
Four?! Gods, four? Has it truly been that long? That is more than half the war, Gascoigne.

And yet, you would have me live.

Why do you hold? If ever your moment had come, is this not it? You know now. I did not just kill your father. I meant to. I destroyed him. Whether I had my reasons or no, *that* is a reason to kill someone. So why does my sword still lie upon the earth?

Go on, lad. Pick it up.

Pick up the sword.

Shall I turn around? I am unarmed!

I'm unarmed! Come!

Avenge him!

COME ON!

Kill me, you coward.

GASCOIGNE stands still.

He does not move.

RYLIKVAR saunters over to the sword and picks it up.

She sheathes it.

RYLIKVAR

Of course I enjoy it.

The best killers, Gascoigne, the ones who see their ambitions fulfilled, are the ones who enjoy it. You must make your peace with that. If you cannot, even the best reason in the Realms will not help you.

GASCOIGNE

You cannot be ready for it.

That's the point.

RYLIKVAR

Ah. That's your excuse? You want to catch me unawares?

GASCOIGNE

I have to wait until you do not want it to come.

But you always do. I have never seen you without your guard.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Go on.

GASCOIGNE

I was done.

RYLIKVAR

Hmm. I suppose you shall have to get over that ideal in your head, then. Or else be prepared to wait a few more scores of snowfall.

If ever that day comes, you would still have me live.

Because you have no joy in you, Gascoigne.

I should have left you to burn alongside your father.

Beat.

GASCOIGNE

We should be going.

RYLIKVAR

Lead the way.

They begin traversing the forest.

RYLIKVAR

How long should we give them?

GASCOIGNE

What do you mean?

RYLIKVAR

You know well what I mean. Answer.

GASCOIGNE

Do you not think it would be good to learn more of this woman?

RYLIKVAR

Where lies the point? What more need I learn?

GASCOIGNE

If--she is a threat?

RYLIKVAR

That matters not. She has disrupted our cause. We would have done better to have ended her then and there.

GASCOIGNE

So why not track her down yourself?

RYLIKVAR

(Stopping)

That is actually not a bad thought.

GASCOIGNE

Or it is.

And you want your land so badly you are willing to overlook any potential danger.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Gods damn you, Gascoigne.

Whatever her trickery, she is only human. Flesh and blood. And bones that break like everyone else. There are some matters in which patience finds itself of lesser value. You would know not.

GASCOIGNE

Yes, miss.

RYLIKVAR

Come.

GASCOIGNE

Yes, miss.

But when RYLIKVAR turns, she soon after steps on something odd.

She stops and looks down at it.

GASCOIGNE

What?

RYLIKVAR says nothing.

She just stares at what she had stepped on.

A dead cardinal, its bones crushed from impact with a tree.

The same one from before.

GASCOIGNE

A red burglar.

Another one?

RYLIKVAR

The same one.

RYLIKVAR looks around at her surroundings.

At a worn bag, made out of material bags shouldn't be made of.

ASTRAEA'S bag sits where she left it.

RYLIKVAR

Gascoigne, we have walked due east since we parted, correct?

GASCOIGNE

Yes.

RYLIKVAR

We have not changed our course nor turned in any way?

GASCOIGNE

No.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Yet we are back where we began.

They are.

Inexplicably, they have returned to the meeting site.

Sutch.

RYLIKVAR puts a hand on her sword, looking around.

GASCOIGNE

This...is not possible. This cannot be possible. How?

A rustle in the bushes nearby.

RYLIKVAR and GASCOIGNE's attention snap to it.

RYLIKVAR

(Drawing her sword)

Get behind me.

RYLIKVAR advances toward the bushes.

From within them, the sound of drawing steel.

Silence.

INAHO emerges from the bushes, her sword raised.

Seeing each other, they both relax.

A little.

My Queen.

RYLIKVAR

What are you doing here?

INAHO

What are we doing here? Look around.

RYLIKVAR

INAHO does.

She notices where they are.

The bag.

What manner of devilry is this?

INAHO

LYSTRIAL, eating an apple, enters through another section of woods.

RYLIKVAR and INAHO turn their weapons to her.

But it's just LYSTRIAL, caught quite off-guard.

And then she notices where she is.

So much for postponing the negotiations.

RYLIKVAR

A bell chimes without urgency as the lights fade.

The characters do not hear it.

They just look at one another.

At where they are.

In the darkness, the bell stops.

As INAHO'S voice rings out into the void, the lights begin to rise.

An indeterminate amount of time has passed.

INAHO

Lys, try, um---...try heading--south. See if south will make any difference.

RYLIKVAR

Not to dampen that brilliant suggestion, but I do not think that outcome would be different from the other cardinal directions.

INAHO

Our alternative is what? Sitting here? Doing nothing?

RYLIKVAR

Better than wondering through the forest in circles, but if you wish, I shall not keep you.

LYSTRIAL

Quiet.

This is beyond anything I have seen. You would both agree?

Then we cannot deny it. However absurd the declaration, somehow she is...something is keeping us here.

I loathe to say this, but I think Rylikvar is right. Given the circumstances, our efforts might be better spent fortifying some course of action here. Together.

INAHO

Our courses of action are limited.

LYSTRIAL

Yes.

INAHO

Where would we even begin?

RYLIKVAR

(Gazing at ASTRAEA'S bag)

I can think of one thing.

This bell she spoke of.

Beat.

INAHO

Are you suggesting we summon her back?

RYLIKVAR

As you said, our alternative is what?

There are three of us. Four. We can take her.

LYSTRIAL

Can we?

If she is keeping us here, what else lies within the scope of her power?

RYLIKVAR

She is only human.

LYSTRIAL

You have seen and heard the same things we have. Can you make that claim with any kind of confidence?

RYLIKVAR

Just as you said, we stand a better chance together. Here. Rather than alone in the forest.

LYSTRIAL

Yes, but it means not we have the liberty to apply natural standards of logic to a situation that has clearly moved beyond it.

INAHO
(To RYLIKVAR)

You have cursed this place.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Sorry, perhaps I misheard you?

INAHO

You have cursed this place.

RYLIKVAR

No? All right.

INAHO

Look around us. We stand on the bones of hundreds. After all this time, still nothing grows here but ash. And dust. It breeds nothing but darkness.

RYLIKVAR
(Overlapping)

I should call that reasonably overdramatic.

INAHO
(Overlapping)

Because your deeds have stained this place with death! It is your doing!

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

Well, now that's just incorrect. Lest you forget, I burned your city down because you would not give me my due attention.

INAHO

Perhaps the woman need not die. Perhaps you are the one keeping us here.

LYSTRIAL

Inaho.

INAHO draws her sword.

LYSTRIAL

Inaho!

INAHO

(Overlapping)

What if we spill your blood, and we find ourselves free to leave?

RYLIKVAR draws hers.

LYSTRIAL

Stop! Ho!

RYLIKVAR

You are welcome to try.

LYSTRIAL

Ladies, this is not the time!

INAHO

To hells with the time.

LYSTRIAL

This should not have to be said!

RYLIKVAR

Do you hear yourself? Pay heed to your friend, My Queen.

Happily, I shall, should you wish, but it is not the time. I would rather not cross blades over your inclination towards superstition.

This woman is alive. Let us do what we should have done in the first place and put an end to her. When she joins the dead, then we might resume the topic of whether or not they have the capability to be mean to us. And you may attempt to slit my throat over whatever ridiculous fancy you wish.

If it please Your Majesty?

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

Inaho.

Inaho. Please.

Beat.

When she is dead. INAHO

When she is dead. RYLIKVAR

Beat.

INAHO lowers her sword.

RYLIKVAR lowers her sword.

Lystrial? RYLIKVAR

Beat.

Oh, Gods. LYSTRIAL

We need to act now. RYLIKVAR

You speak as if we are not in superstition. LYSTRIAL

We are. Does that not frighten you?

Everything has a rational explanation. RYLIKVAR

Then what is this? Please tell me. LYSTRIAL

We have to do something. RYLIKVAR

This is a bad idea. LYSTRIAL

Have you a better one? RYLIKVAR

(Beat, crossing towards the bag)

If you do not do it, I shall.

Hold! Hold. LYSTRIAL

If this is our course...expect anything. Be ready for anything.

Always am. RYLIKVAR

LYSTRIAL

Then come here.

RYLIKVAR

What?

LYSTRIAL

You both may, but I shall not take a life during a Sanctuary.

Break it.

LYSTRIAL holds out her hands.

Beat.

*RYLIKVAR and INAHO cross to
LYSTRIAL, sheathing their swords.*

They join hands and begin a prayer.

ALL

Gods of the Realms. We lift out our voices. Hear us as we cry. Break our Sanctuary, for we have found peace in your light. We came together as enemies, but we now depart as one. We praise your guidance, and thank you for your favor. It has been said. Now let it be so.

RYLIKVAR and INAHO lift their heads.

*LYSTRIAL prays a moment longer to
herself.*

RYLIKVAR

Whenever you are ready.

LYSTRIAL does not deign to respond.

*She simply finishes praying in her own
time.*

RYLIKVAR

So glad you could join us.

Now.

*RYLIKVAR makes for the bag, but
LYSTRIAL stops her.*

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

May I?

RYLIKVAR

Be my guest.

LYSTRIAL crosses to the bag.

Looks at it.

Breathes.

She draws her sword, then looks at the others, who follow suit.

LYSTRIAL kneels on the ground by the bag.

She touches it and starts to open it, but quickly takes her hand away, perturbed.

INAHO

What is it?

LYSTRIAL

Nothing. It just, um---it feels like...skin.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL opens the bag and reaches inside it.

She searches through it, equally frightened, horrified, and captivated.

She pulls out an old, thick tome, buckled shut with straps of leather, its cover wrapped with the same blue bandages ASTRAEA wears.

She tries briefly to unclasp its buckles, but manages nothing.

She sets it aside.

And goes back into the bag.

She searches, but it's as if the dimensions of the inside are larger than the outside.

If she hasn't already, LYSTRIAL lets her sword fall to the ground next to her in a flustered unease.

She searches.

She searches.

She searches.

She is quite flustered now.

Lys?

INAHO

There's no bell.

LYSTRIAL

What?

RYLIKVAR

There is no bell in here.

LYSTRIAL

Godsdamn.

RYLIKVAR

If she deliberately lied, then--

INAHO

Wait.

LYSTRIAL
(Seeing something)

LYSTRIAL moves something inside the bag, getting a closer look.

She leans closer.

She stares.

Her eyes widen.

LYSTRIAL startles back from the bag, crawling backward, thrashing at it, madly trying to get it away and put as much distance between herself and it as she can.

Ho!

RYLIKVAR

Lys!

INAHO
(Overlapping)

But any movement they make towards LYSTRIAL stops.

Everyone looks at her in fear.

Specifically, her arm.

LYSTRIAL hasn't noticed, staring wild-eyed at the bag, but then she feels it.

She looks down at her arm and lifts it, inspects it intently.

It's covered in some kind of translucent slime.

The ash on the ground, too, has contaminated it, making her arm look a virulent rot.

The visage is haunting.

Silence.

Not a sound in the world.

Finally:

Lys?

INAHO

LYSTRIAL'S gaze snaps to INAHO.

And an ungodly, inhuman bloodcurdling of a sound escapes her mouth.

She attacks INAHO with an unhinged fury.

Lys!

INAHO

Hey! Woah!

RYLIKVAR

INAHO dodges and defends herself, her sword vs. LYSTRIAL'S bare hands, but can't bring herself to wound her would-be assailant, clearly trying to not hurt her.

LYSTRIAL, however, presses the attack on INAHO, fueled by some kind of mad insanity.

It's like she's trying to eat her.

LYS, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

INAHO

LYSTRIAL responds only with more strikes and screams.

LYSTRIAL!
RYLIKVAR

STOP, LYS!!
INAHO

The fight begins to cover more ground now, as INAHO tries at more and more length to defend herself and avoid hurting LYSTRIAL.

Something's wrong with her!
INAHO

I CAN SEE THAT!
RYLIKVAR

RYLIKVAR, meanwhile, watches the fray like a hawk, searching for the right moment.

Lys!
INAHO

I wish not to hurt you!

RYLIKVAR
She feels differently! Watch your left!

INAHO
(Narrowly avoiding)
SILENCE!

RYLIKVAR
You cannot dodge like that forever!

INAHO
CLOSE YOUR FILTHY MOUTH!!

But the distraction of yelling at RYLIKVAR proves too great and LYSTRIAL lands a solid blow, tackling INAHO to the ground.

She straddles INAHO and pins her down, licking her own lips, perhaps even drooling.

RYLIKVAR runs in and wrenches LYSTRIAL off INAHO, who proceeds to bite her sword arm.

RYLIKVAR
(Screaming in pain, dropping
her sword)

AHHHH!

*RYLIKVAR punches LYSTRIAL across the
face with her free arm, sending her flying.*

INAHO

No!

RYLIKVAR

QUIET!

*RYLIKVAR grabs her sword and turns it to
LYSTRIAL, who's still on the ground.*

LYSTRIAL's body shakes.

More eerie sounds escape her.

A perverse glee.

*She slowly stands as the others watch her
in horror.*

INAHO

Gods.

RYLIKVAR
(Bolstering her sword)

Stay back.

*LYSTRIAL smiles a wide-toothed, open
grin.*

*And she picks up her own sword from the
ground.*

Points it at RYLIKVAR.

RYLIKVAR

Oh, fuck me.

LYSTRIAL shrieks and the two engage.

*Unlike INAHO, RYLIKVAR doesn't hesitate
to attack.*

She does so ferociously.

They trade strikes, parries, blows.

RYLIKVAR scrappily hacks with the brutal strength of a farmgirl turned warrior.

LYSTRIAL...dances.

She is still animalistic, but sword now in hand, her movements are fluid, filled with a deadly grace that deftly and mischievously hops out of RYLIKVAR'S reach.

It is a sight to behold, the very duel RYLIKVAR wanted.

It's mesmerizing.

Lys!
I need your help!
LYS!
Inaho!
LYS, STOP!
RYLIKVAR
THAT ISN'T SUDDENLY GOING TO START WORKING!

INAHO

RYLIKVAR

INAHO

RYLIKVAR

INAHO

RYLIKVAR

INAHO now the distraction, RYLIKVAR barely parries a strike.

The fight continues.

RYLIKVAR is losing.

Inaho!
NOW!
INAHO!

RYLIKVAR

INAHO jumps back into the fray (perhaps parrying a would-be disastrous strike), and the dance envelops all three women.

LYSTRIAL, fueled by forces unknown, natural skill, or some perversion of the two, manages to fend both of them off yet.

RYLIKVAR and INAHO are losing.

LYSTRIAL disables RYLIKVAR with a kick, who falls to the ground, trying to catch her breath.

INAHO steps in, but LYSTRIAL quickly makes short work of disarming her.

She tackles INAHO once more, putting sword to throat, bringing her face so close to hers their lips practically touch, albeit in a significantly different manner than before.

ASTRAEA

(Holding up her pendant)

LYSTRIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAL!

At the sound of ASTRAEA'S voice (again having entered unseen), LYSTRIAL'S body snaps rigid and she freezes, though all her fervor and energy still simmers beneath.

ASTRAEA

Hold, my girl. Move not.

LYSTRIAL doesn't.

She just bores into INAHO'S eyes.

RYLIKVAR

Where in all hells did you come from?!

ASTRAEA doesn't answer or even acknowledge RYLIKVAR, but swiftly moves to LYSTRIAL and places her arms over her shoulders.

She speaks to her softly in a language we've never heard spoken aloud.

ASTRAEA

Qhi'lurg ulhghan cye'laak rthandth kuuhlyl.

Qhi'lurg ulhghan cye'laak rthandth kuuhlyl.

Low growling yelps escape from LYSTRIAL now.

But she does not move.

RYLIKVAR

What are you doing?

ASTRAEA

SAVING her! Quiet!

(Back to LYSTRIAL)

Qhi'lurg ulhghan cye'laak rthandth kuuhlyl.

Qhi'lurg ulhghan cye'laak rthandth kuuhlyl.

(Practically hissing)

Icthgng hthlth'ach! Llarguhl lth'ach!

Qhi'lurg. Qhi'lurg lth'ach.

LYSTRIAL calms.

ASTRAEA

Lystrial.

At this, the tension leaves LYSTRIAL.

ASTRAEA slowly lifts her from INAHO.

ASTRAEA

That's it. Yes. Yes. Good. There, there.

LYSTRIAL says nothing.

She just eases back into ASTRAEA'S arms.

Lays against her breast.

INAHO

Lys. Gods, Lys.

ASTRAEA

Let go of the sword, child.

LYSTRIAL does.

It falls to the ground.

ASTRAEA

(Stroking her head)

There, there. Good girl. I know. I know.

Silence.

Everyone is somewhat too stunned to move.

LYSTRIAL stares into space.

Vacant.

Empty.

ASTRAEA

Gascoigne.

Would you happen to have any water?

RYLIKVAR
(Moving toward ASTRAEA,
leading with her sword)

Boy, do not move.

ASTRAEA

Kill me and she dies. Is that what you want?

You shall not save her with the limits of your knowledge.

INAHO

Explain yourself.

RYLIKVAR

Inaho--

INAHO
(A low bellow)

EXPLAIN YOURSELF!

Beat.

ASTRAEA

Her mind is under assault.

RYLIKVAR

What?

ASTRAEA

There are greater forces than the two of you at play in these Realms. I tried to impart all this to you before, but you neglected to heed my--

INAHO punches ASTRAEA.

Beat.

ASTRAEA

If you would rather I depart once more--

Quiet. You unctuous cunt.

INAHO

Fix her now.

My Queen--

ASTRAEA

NOW!

INAHO

Inaho, you--

RYLIKVAR

INAHO grabs LYSTRIAL'S (or the closest) sword and points it at RYLIKVAR.

RYLIKVAR quits talking, but maintains her guard.

In the sense that you mean, I am afraid it is not that simple.

ASTRAEA

INAHO points the sword at ASTRAEA.

Though...it is possible.

ASTRAEA

I would need time to prepare.

Then you best get to work.

INAHO

Or I shall pick your fibers apart with my bare hands. Your death will be slower than you might even begin to conceive.

At your command. My Queen.

ASTRAEA

Gascoigne. Water, please. For Queen Lystrial.

GASCOIGNE retrieves the waterskin from his pack as ASTRAEA crosses to her bag to gather her necessities.

Here.

INAHO

GASCOIGNE hands the skin to INAHO, who takes it and locks eyes with RYLIKVAR.

Beat.

She breaks to comfort LYSTRIAL and give her water.

RYLIKVAR turns away and kicks the ground in anger.

She looks back at ASTRAEA, rummaging through her bag.

ASTRAEA pulls out a bell.

RYLIKVAR'S the only one who seems to notice.

She stares at ASTRAEA.

And ASTRAEA "looks" at RYLIKVAR.

ASTRAEA smiles.

She rings the bell.

She continues to ring the bell as the lights fade.

END OF ACT II.

ACT III

The bell does not stop.

It rings throughout the darkness, which is only broken when GASCOIGNE sets alight a lantern or two.

The lights rise.

It is night.

The moon shines blue, but GASCOIGNE continues to light the area with lanterns and other flame.

LYSTRIAL lies in the empty pond, her back resting against some stones or a dead tree.

She stares forward without expression.

INAHO has not left her side, broken.

ASTRAEA roams about the area, holding out her pendant and ringing her bell, whispering her strange language under her breath.

RYLIKVAR rests the farthest away from it all, her back against a tree, her sword gripped tight in her hands, relentlessly staring.

She does not look well.

Eventually, GASCOIGNE finds himself near her.

RYLIKVAR
(Re: LYSTRIAL)

Look at her.

She looks alien. Lifeless.

Paluur.

GASCOIGNE

What?

RYLIKVAR

Batshit Boy.

They did something to him. That his sanity could just not withstand.

GASCOIGNE

Do you think she can fix her?

RYLIKVAR

Do you think she wants to?

Can you distract her?

GASCOIGNE

What?

RYLIKVAR

Can you get to her? Without her sensing anything?

GASCOIGNE

I...

RYLIKVAR

Hear me, Gascoigne, this is survival now. We have no time to waver, she has to die. We just need a moment, a--second where she is---she is only human.

She is only human.

ASTRAEA

I assure you, Rylikvar, more violence would be an extremely unwise course.

I am blind. Not deaf.

RYLIKVAR

I am sure you do. But you must understand our unease? No? We are not well accustomed with the sights to which we have laid witness.

ASTRAEA

Precisely why I am here to help you. Please, inquire of me whatever you wish. It shall be a joy to answer you.

RYLIKVAR

Is that what you told Paluur?

ASTRAEA

We were too late to save the boy.

For Queen Lystrial, there may be time yet. My prayers have calmed her presently, but the raucous perturbations of the dead will return.

RYLIKVAR

The dead?

ASTRAEA

Yes. You birthed colossal suffering here, Rylikvar. This place, it weeps anger. It wishes not we prosper. Why else think you you were unable to leave?

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

I could think of a few alternatives to ghosts.

ASTRAEA

No, my child, ghosts are memory. Harmless, as much as memory is. I speak of vindictive spirits. Real shades left behind. With intentions.

INAHO

A curse.

ASTRAEA

You might say, yes. A collected torment that desires us all. Widens its gullet in hunger.

But God is at work in His Heaven. He fights for us all. For Queen Lystrial. I can only pray my arrival is not too late.

Had you not sent me away I could have explained all of this earlier.

INAHO

Enough of that.

What next? After your...

ASTRAEA

Warding, My Queen.

I must first bless this land, so these spirits will be unable to interfere in our proceedings.

INAHO

And then?

ASTRAEA

At your insistence, there are rites that I would perform, the purpose of which are to ease her mind. Save her soul from the mouth of darkness.

Solely with your permission, of course. Should you desire I take my leave once more--

INAHO

No. Stay.

RYLIKVAR

(To INAHO)

Are you this mad? Curses and the dead?

ASTRAEA

Disbelief in something does not negate its existence, Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR

(Overlapping)

I speak not to you.

ASTRAEA

It is all right if you are scared.

RYLIKVAR

Inaho. My Queen, are you truly listening to this?

ASTRAEA

I am.

RYLIKVAR

(To ASTRAEA)

Quiet.

(To INAHO)

We have no cause to trust her. She has given us none.

ASTRAEA

That is why we call it faith.

RYLIKVAR

(To ASTRAEA)

To hells with your faith!

(To INAHO)

My Queen, use your head. For once. She is lying. Every--every oddity that has befallen us arrived with her presence, do you not think that strange?

ASTRAEA

Oddities live abundant, Your Grace.

RYLIKVAR

Quiet.

ASTRAEA

You just need know where to look.

RYLIKVAR

The bird! The bird. The forest, the things of which she spoke!

ASTRAEA

Have I lied?

RYLIKVAR

How would she know of them if not for some trick?

ASTRAEA

I have spoken no falsehoods.

RYLIKVAR

(To ASTRAEA)

By all hells, quiet!

(To INAHO)

She said that bell was in her bag. Why could Lystrial not find it?

ASTRAEA

Small bell, big bag.

RYLIKVAR

She looked for ages! She grew crazed at the sight of her damned bag! Inaho! My Queen, she--

She--she can see. She can see, that canker, I know it. She is toying with us. She is a liar, Inaho. Listen to her mouth, she speaks in tongues. You have to believe me. Believe me! Do not believe me, I care not! Believe in her deeds. Believe in anything! But believe. Inaho. She needs to die. She needs to die. She has--Now. Now! End this. Now. Please.

Beat.

INAHO

Believe in her deeds?

RYLIKVAR

Yes.

INAHO

Think you that scenario easier, than the reality of your own?

Beat.

ASTRAEA

We must all accept our sins, Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR

Gods.

ASTRAEA

It is natural to want a different source to blame.

RYLIKVAR

Gods.

(To ASTRAEA)

Unhand me!

(To INAHO)

YOU! You are blind! You useless woman! You! You shut your mind to what is right in front of you! I accept my sins! I ACCEPT MY SINS! I BURNED YOUR PEOPLE! I WOULD DO IT AGAIN IF YOU GAVE ME CAUSE! But my sins mean not this place is some mystical beacon for darkness, so do not kill us all just because you cannot fuck your mistress while she is catatonic!

INAHO reacts, ready to avenge those words, but holds at the sound of:

GASCOIGNE

STOP!!

Please stop.

Silence.

RYLIKVAR

If she dies not, we do.

Beat.

INAHO

Know you all we would give to watch you?

Speak no more.

Beat.

Distraught, perhaps in shock, with no more to be said, RYLIVKAR returns to her tree in silence.

ASTRAEA

I can only serve you if you give me your trust.

Without it, we shall all fall.

INAHO

Can you fix her or not?

ASTRAEA

I can.

INAHO

Then you have it.

INAHO extends her hand to shake in accord.

ASTRAEA does not take it, for obvious reasons.

Beat.

(However long we dare take such a beat.)

INAHO

(Removing her hand)

Give us not cause to lose it.

But ASTRAEA now takes INAHO'S hand and places her palms o'er hers.

Without any issue at all.

ASTRAEA

You have my all, Your Grace.

Rylikvar?

Should I worry you might strike me when my focus is elsewhere?

INAHO

She shan't.

ASTRAEA

Then would you be so kind as to assist me, Your Majesty? Encircle the pond with some of the lanterns?

ASTRAEA releases INAHO and returns to her warding, making a few final preparations for the rites.

Perhaps the chant from Lystrial's story returns as an underscore, enveloping the space with dread.

INAHO finally picks up and sheathes her sword.

Perhaps locks a glance with RYLIKVAR.

Then moves to help transfer lanterns to the pond, encircling it with light.

RYLIKVAR just watches, silent.

GASCOIGNE watches her.

Trying not to watch.

Perhaps they, too, lock a glance or two.

Without urgency, in their own way, they all prepare for the rites.

ASTRAEA retrieves her leather tome from the ground.

And she rings her bell one final time.

It ripples through the silent night air.

ASTRAEA

We are ready.

Sit with her. Take her hands.

INAHO does.

ASTRAEA sits, setting the book down on a rock or piece of heightened ground.

Everyone.

ASTRAEA

Beat.

RYLIKVAR and GASCOIGNE cross to the pond and sit.

Please close the circle.

ASTRAEA

They do.

ASTRAEA opens her book.

Beat.

Well?

INAHO

Beat.

You will recall my words, this is not a simple endeavor.

ASTRAEA

Her mind has been...aggrieved. Scarred by these spirits. There are deteriorations growing in her that shall be beyond repair.

You cannot fix her?

INAHO

I can. But right now, she is empty. Hollow, like a molted crustacean. What has been lost may not be restored.

ASTRAEA

It must be replaced.

What do you mean?

INAHO

In order for me to lend Queen Lystrial my full assistance, she shall need...new material.

ASTRAEA

RYLIKVAR, who got the gist a moment ago, can only laugh.

Speak plainly, woman.

INAHO

She has. Do you not hear her? This is no ceremony. It's a sacrifice.

RYLIKVAR

Beat.

ASTRAEA

If you need some time to decide--

INAHO

Surely, you jest.

ASTRAEA

I do not. At the culmination, one of you must offer your blood and materia as a supplement to her. An offering to God.

INAHO

What kind of God--? What manner of heretics are you?!

ASTRAEA

We are but humble servants, My Queen.

INAHO

This is lunacy!

ASTRAEA

There is no other way. Would I there were.

I am sorry.

INAHO

Gods damn you.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

(With deranged levity)

Well.

Does anybody wish to volunteer?

Did not think it could hurt to ask.

(Beat, suddenly rising and
breaking away)

I suppose we might as well get on with it, then.

*RYLIKVAR draws her sword and continues
her unhinged harangue, while INAHO
reacts in kind to guard herself.*

RYLIKVAR

I do not think anyone is going to stop us this time, My Queen.

So what say you? With whatever Gods or God or imaginaria as our audience? Shall we dance together upon these ashes 'til the greater warrior prevails?

INAHO stands, ready.

Until the greater warrior prevails.

INAHO

Beat.

Their fatal clash is about to begin.

No.

GASCOIGNE

No. Do not fight. Please.

INAHO

Stay out of this, boy.

GASCOIGNE

I will do it!

I will offer my body. I will do it.

RYLIKVAR

Gascoigne.

GASCOIGNE
(To ASTRAEA)

Will you take me?

Will I be enough?

ASTRAEA

You will, my child. God accepts us all.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

No.

ASTRAEA

No?

GASCOIGNE

Miss, please.

RYLIKVAR

No, I forbid it.

GASCOIGNE

Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR

I forbid you, you are my page.

The boy has volunteered. INAHO

Beat.

He is a child. RYLIKVAR

And he has volunteered. INAHO

He is not your boy. RYLIKVAR

Rylikvar. Please. The men need you. People need you. Both of you. I'm not anyone. Let me do this. GASCOIGNE

You would give your life for her? RYLIKVAR

It is not just for her. GASCOIGNE

Beat.

No. RYLIKVAR

Rylikvar! GASCOIGNE

So be it. INAHO
(Overlapping)

I shall do it. RYLIKVAR

I shall offer my body, and rid you of me forever.

On one condition.

Beat.

My land. INAHO

It was never about the land. RYLIKVAR

You do know that?

(Beat, kneeling, her head
bowed)

I ask at your mercy, My Queen.

Spare the boy.

Beat.

INAHO

And why should we grant such a favor to a renegade the likes of you?

ASTRAEA

For the sake of peace, Your Grace.

Let us return it to our world once again.

Beat.

INAHO

It shall be done.

*RYLIKVAR looks at INAHO, tears in her
eyes.*

She nods.

*The women collect themselves and rejoin
the circle.*

GASCOIGNE stops RYLIKVAR.

GASCOIGNE

Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR

I am afraid your chance has come and gone, Gascoigne.

You know, I have never told you.

You have grown so tall.

I cannot guarantee, but I imagine Io Luciae needs a fine page.

*RYLIKVAR moves away and rejoins the
circle.*

GASCOIGNE

Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR

Begin.

GASCOIGNE reluctantly rejoins the circle.

ASTRAEA

When she moves, restrain her.

Rylikvar. God thanks you. Peace thanks you. When the time comes...

(Removing a twisted dagger
from her cloak)

You shall know.

The ritual begins.

*It is scored by the bells and chants we
have come to know.*

*Or perhaps somehow something even
darker.*

*ASTRAEA, moving her fingers along the
pages of her book, hums and chants,
joining the chorus of sound.*

Or leading it.

ASTRAEA

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha.

*LYSTRIAL moves almost imperceptibly, her
body subconsciously responding to
ASTRAEA'S words.*

INAHO

Lys.

ASTRAEA

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha

God! Your servant humbly calls upon Your Heaven. I come before you to plead for the
life of this woman. Ease her mind, O God, that she may commune with us again.

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha.

LYSTRIAL'S movements grow.

ASTRAEA

Return her to us once again!
Strengthen her, O God
Fortify her, God

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha

With me!

ALL
(The others doing the best
they can with the language)

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha.

LYSTRIAL slowly laughs.

Cries.

Insane.

ALL

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!

LYSTRIAL'S movements grow.

INAHO

Lys!

ALL

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!

ASTRAEA

Give her your peace!
Quell her thoughts, O God!

LYSTRIAL'S insanity builds.

ASTRAEA

Again!

ALL

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!

Her insanity builds.

ASTRAEA

With all the power of Your Heaven, I command her to light!
Retrieve her soul from the depths of the darkness and fire!

Qhi'lurg!

Qhi'lurg lth'ach!

Ba'agharak zuqlhurak!

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!

ALL
(Joining in)

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!

Her insanity peaks.

ALL

Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!
Ra'athgaa kuluuagha!

LYSTRIAL stops, staring straight ahead.

Silence.

*She suddenly jerks back, her arms
outstretched, her face locked in a scream.*

But the scream, this time, is not hers.

*It is deeper. Primal. Filled with anguish
from a world not touched by humankind.*

HOLD HER!

ASTRAEA

They do.

The insanity builds.

QHI'LUUUUUUUURG!

ASTRAEA

*LYSTRIAL lowers her head and locks eyes
with ASTRAEA, snarling and growling.*

Qhi'lurg ulghan cye'laak rthandth kuuhlyl!

ASTRAEA

LYSTRIAL focus shifts to the others.

TO ME!

ASTRAEA

She turns back to ASTRAEA.

ICTHGNG QHI'LURG!
BA'AGHARAK QHI'LURG!

ASTRAEA

The insanity builds.

ASTRAEA

KULUUAGHA ZUQ! LYULA'SAK ZUQ!
QHI'LURG ULHGHAN CYE'LAAC RTHNA'DTH KUUHLYL!
QHI'LURG ULHGHAN CYE'LAAC RTHNA'DTH KUUHLYL!
ICTHGNG BA'AGHARAK ZUQ!
LTH'ACH RA'ATHGAA ZUQ!
QHI'LURG ULHGHAN CYE'LAAC RTHNA'DTH KUUHLYL!

The insanity peaks.

*The others can barely keep a hold on
LYSTRIAL.*

*But ASTRAEA presses on, holding up the
dagger now.*

RYLIKVAR...notices.

Prepares herself.

ASTRAEA

GOD!

ACCEPT THIS BLOOD!

RECTIFY HER, GOD!

It all converges.

*And shatters to a stop as ASTRAEA plunges
the dagger into GASCOIGNE.*

Not RYLIKVAR.

RYLIKVAR

NOOOO!

*RYLIKVAR tackles ASTRAEA, screaming,
proceeding to batter her.*

*GASCOIGNE, in shock, falls to the ground,
losing life.*

LYSTRIAL convulses in place.

RYLIKVAR beats ASTRAEA.

LYSTRIAL'S convulsions slow.

*She jerks a final time, and then falls over
as the lanterns fail, snuffed out by some
unseen force.*

*Only the night sky and the moonlight
illuminate them now.*

*Silence, save for RYLIKVAR beating
ASTRAEA, her strikes now slowing as
fatigue, grief, and exasperation set in.*

INAHO wrenches her away.

RYLIKVAR looks at INAHO.

At LYSTRIAL.

At GASCOIGNE.

She crawls to him.

Holds him.

RYLIKVAR

No. No no no. No. No.

She needs to say anything else.

She tries.

But she cannot find the words.

GASCOIGNE dies.

Silence.

ASTRAEA laughs.

*Slow at first. At the start, it maybe even
sounds as if she's just choking on her own
blood.*

But she's laughing.

And it grows.

*A pure, chaotic evil, finally revealing its
face.*

ASTRAEA

O no. My hand must have slipped.

Shall we try again?

*RYLIKVAR screams, her mind
deteriorating.*

What is the matter?
ASTRAEA

What are you?
RYLIKVAR

I am but a humble servant.
ASTRAEA

O Gods!
RYLIKVAR

Gods forgive me.

ASTRAEA
Rylikvar, no. No no no, my child. Do you not understand? You have committed no sins. You need not God's forgiveness. He is so proud of you, Rylikvar. You have done such work.

RYLIKVAR, barely able to process, slowly finds her sword.

What are you doing?
ASTRAEA

RYLIKVAR meekly moves toward ASTRAEA.

ASTRAEA
Are you not glad? We bow to you, Our Queen. The songs they will sing of you. The stories they will tell!

Rylikvar Narr! Creator of Kingdoms! Mistress of Ash! The Firebringer!

RYLIKVAR inches forward, doing the only thing her body is capable of.

ASTRAEA
My Queen, consider your course...if you strike me down, another will simply rise in my place.

RYLIKVAR stops.

Silence.

INAHO kills ASTRAEA.

Yes.
INAHO

But you shall be dead.

RYLIKVAR collapses.

A long silence.

Long enough for the night to pass.

*The sun slowly begins to rise, washing the
ashes and blood in warm light.*

INAHO exits.

And LYSTRIAL slowly sits up.

Awake.

She looks around.

Takes in the ambience.

The dead city.

ASTRAEA'S body.

GASCOIGNE'S body.

Birds.

Birds chirp in the distance.

She smiles faintly.

The sun has risen.

*LYSTRIAL speaks to RYLIKVAR, who
perhaps hasn't budged.*

LYSTRIAL

Listen to them.

We used to chase them. As girls. I could always get closer to them than she. It vexed her so.

Her brow would furrow and her voice would...

Such a simple music.

I am so sorry, Rylikvar.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

She went hunting. To break fast.

LYSTRIAL

I know. I saw.

RYLIKVAR

So it worked?

LYSTRIAL

My head hurts greatly. And I think not I shall ever be what I once was.

But, yes, it seems it has.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

I should not be alive.

LYSTRIAL

Yet you are. You must not lament it.

We may only go forward.

RYLIKVAR

Lystrial?

LYSTRIAL

Lys, please. We have been through enough now, I should think.

RYLIKVAR

Lys.

The boy gave you his life. Do not dishonor it.

LYSTRIAL

I shan't. I promise you.

About you two. Would you permit me a small curiosity?

RYLIKVAR

No.

INAHO enters, holding a pair of dead, white rabbits.

She sees LYSTRIAL, awake.

LYSTRIAL looks back, smiling.

INAHO drops the rabbits and runs to LYSTRIAL, embracing her.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

So what happens now?

LYSTRIAL and INAHO break.

No one knows exactly what to say.

RYLIKVAR

Are we at peace? My Queen?

Or does my continued existence render void our accord?

Beat.

INAHO

We are a woman of our word. The land is yours.

LYSTRIAL

Then it is done.

The war is over.

Beat.

RYLIKVAR

There are more of them out there.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL

Yes. And we can no longer afford to ignore their presence.

This God of theirs is real. We cannot deny that.

RYLIKVAR

No.

INAHO

No.

Beat.

LYSTRIAL moves to ASTRAEA'S body.

*She stares at ASTRAEA, her face an
enigma.*

LYSTRIAL

I fear to say I know too well now the horror that shall descend on our kingdoms. Our homes. Families.

INAHO

Lys?

The bag.

What exactly did you see?

*LYSTRIAL'S face flickers a million
different emotions, remembering.*

LYSTRIAL

I saw God.

*As she continues, LYSTRIAL reaches down
to a pool of still wet blood around
ASTRAEA'S body.*

She touches it, wetting her palms with it.

*She caresses her own face, wiping blood
over it.*

Over her eyes.

Like she's just gouged them out.

*Her face slowly becomes a dark,
picturesque nightmare.*

LYSTRIAL

He slumbers in the darkness. They call it His Heaven. But it is dark. And cold. And wet. And He waits in the deep for the day that His holy servants will prepare the way. He wants to come back, Rylikvar. He wants to come back. To return to our Realms and usher them back to the Ancient Times.

And she just keeps going.

*In fact, she's removing ASTRAEA'S
bandages from her face now.*

And wrapping them around her own.

Her eyes are mesmerizing.

*INAHO and RYLIKVAR, watching this,
start to slowly back away, any will left in
them draining.*

LYSTRIAL

Those times long before reason and diplomacy reigned. Blood. A never-ending blood. Encompassing blood that runs through the rivers and fills the oceans with its plasmas. That rains from the sky and covers us all in jubilation. God will be there! Guiding us all. He will join us. In the blood. In the carnage and the stick and the ash and the gore and the flames. In the world that once He made. Rylikvar.

RYLIKVAR draws/finds her sword.

LYSTRIAL

There are so many of them out there. We can ignore them no longer! We must take action. We must preach. We must preach His word to our subjects. Our harbors. Our

dead. All must know. All will know the grandeur of what is to come. Rylikvar.

You look pale, Firebringer.

RYLIKVAR
(A broken whimper)

No.

LYSTRIAL
No, you do. You are as white as a ghost.

Sorry, vindictive spirit.

LYSTRIAL laughs.

A pure, evil insanity.

*She continues, now crossing to
GASCOIGNE'S body.*

She pets his head.

And retrieves the dagger.

LYSTRIAL
Thank you, dear child.

RYLIKVAR
No.

LYSTRIAL
(To INAHO)
My love?! What say you?

I know what you must be thinking. I know what you are thinking. I know everything now.
But fear not. God has a purpose for us all! He walks with us all! My loves! We shall
bring about a New Age! We shall bring peace once again!

(To RYLIKVAR)

And you shall lead us.

RYLIKVAR
Stop.

LYSTRIAL advances towards RYLIKVAR.

LYSTRIAL
Let me show you the grandeur, Rylikvar! That loving violence!

RYLIKVAR
Stop.

LYSTRIAL
Please let me show you. You shall drip to see it. I promise.

RYLIKVAR
(Proffering her sword, in tears,
utterly broken)

STOP!

*LYSTRIAL finally stops, the point of
RYLIKVAR'S sword just short of her
breast.*

LYSTRIAL
Consider your course, My Queen. You weep so, you look in no condition for friendly
sparring.

What was it you said your men called me? Mesmerizing?

*LYSTRIAL walks forward, RYLIKVAR'S
sword plunging into (and through) her
breast.*

It does not faze her in the slightest.

*She just keeps walking forward, right into
RYLIKVAR's face, who cowers in fear,
unable to move.*

*(Or perhaps she just playfully removes the
sword from her path.)*

LYSTRIAL
Or what were your words? Let me recall. O yes.

LYSTRIAL licks the knife.

Or maybe RYLIKVAR'S face.

LYSTRIAL
My reputation precedes me.

LYSTRIAL laughs.

The birds chirp.

*LYSTRIAL shrieks wildly and slits her own
throat, spraying blood all over RYLIKVAR.*

*RYLIKVAR reacts however one might react
to such things.*

However she does, her mind is finished.

She looks to INAHO.

Beat.

INAHO draws her own sword and slits her throat.

Again, RYLIKVAR reacts however one might react to such things, be it a verbal exclamation or just some whimpering animal sound escaping her mouth.

The birds chirp.

A bell chimes, filling the city.

RYLIKVAR hears it, clear as day.

She looks up in fear as the chimes only get louder.

Faster.

People chanting.

Chanting her name.

Screaming her name.

Warhorns.

Battle.

Death.

Flame.

She looks around, even at the audience, frightened and wide-eyed at things unseen to us.

The chaos builds.

Builds.

Builds.

Peaks.

And abruptly stops.

No sound now.

No birds.

No wildlife.

Deafening silence.

GASCOIGNE has stood up.

He is bloodied.

Covered in ash.

It is not entirely clear if he is somehow alive, dead, or something else entirely.

He stares at RYLIKVAR.

RYLIKVAR, ever the warrior, through nothing but muscle memory, grabs a sword to defend herself.

But they just stare at one another.

Silence.

RYLIKVAR drops the sword and turns, staggering away.

She slowly staggers away.

She exits.

GASCOIGNE looks at the sword.

He stands still.

All is still.

Silence.

END OF PLAY.