

Tyrants

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Adriana is the captain of the guard of the High City of Paliano, a post that puts her in the service of the ghost king, Brago. But recently, she has begun to question the king's actions; he's crueler in his death than he was in life. It's clear from rumblings around the city that others share her doubts.

Old habits die hard, and the hardest habits to kill are those that belong to the dead. Adriana, captain of the guard of the High City of Paliano, knew this better than most. She stood dutifully at her post, at the shoulder of the great King Brago. He had grown paranoid in his afterlife (a curious reaction to becoming immortal) and requested his captain attend him even in his times of counsel. Adriana was now in the great dining hall—an imposing stone chamber that echoed more than it warmed. It wasn't cozy, but the king preferred holding his meetings here for one reason or another. He seemed comforted by its large banners bearing the mark of his city, its swords and signets displayed on the walls. Brago seemed strangely content to spend his death hovering among the things he used to touch and wield. He never seemed sad that he could not hold them—he never seemed sad about anything anymore. He felt plenty of other things, but pity wasn't one of them. It was not a captain's place to question her king, so Adriana leaned to the left and stretched out a cramp in her right calf as she waited on the king to finish playing pretend.

King Brago sat at the head of his dining room table before a clean plate and sparkling silverware, whispering quietly and patiently with two Custodi ghosts who hovered in the chairs to his left. The voices of the dead often grew quiet with age, and from Adriana's position near the back of the room, the clinking of her armor made the only noise in the hall. The three ghosts were discussing church business, and out of some bastardization of habit were doing so in front of glittering empty place settings. As they moved their hands in conversation they would curiously maneuver around the array of empty glasses and barren goblets.

Adriana had served the king for many years. She knew that even in death he retained a sort of muscle memory with regard to the customs of the living. Ghosts weren't anything special, but no one ever *purposefully* ended up one. When he retained his title after death, Adriana was left with a frightening realization. If her lord would never die, she was doomed to serve him her whole life. Captains in the past had grown close to several generations of royalty, yet she was doomed to only one. Paliano's throne was disrupted. Succession had hiccupped long ago.

Memory of this discovery did not soothe the cramp in her leg.

Every now and then she caught a word or two exchanged between the ghosts. They seemed to be discussing the success in their elimination of cogwork from the streets of Paliano. They seemed pleased with the closing of the Academy, happy that those who stood against them were absent or dead.

She had been ordered to help quell the insurrection then. To dismantle the Academy, to purge the pursuit of invention and innovation from the city.

A whisper of guilt traveled through Adriana's mind. The king she served in his life had become cruel in his death. She would never admit it out loud, but she knew it in her heart.

The ghosts' business concluded, the Custodi rose, and Adriana strode forward to escort them out. A servant girl entered behind her to clear the plates (*Do they clean them again anyway? Isn't that a tremendous waste of soap?* Adriana wondered). King Brago nodded discreetly at his captain, and Adriana acknowledged by leading the clergy out of the dining hall and into the hallway. The two moved cautiously, with more of a chill to the air around them than normal. The manner all around the three was ill at ease.

Three minutes into the walk down the hallway, the two ghosts stopped in front of the main door. "*Captain Adriana...*" they whispered. Adriana stilled. She had never been addressed directly by the Custodi before.

The Custodi nearest her raised their hands in benediction. Ghostly fingers tapped chills on her skin—shoulder, shoulder, forehead. Adriana received the blessing willingly, but wondered absently why they were departing with such a formal goodbye.

The spirits departed, and Adriana turned, happy to relieve the cramp in her leg with a brief walk. A sudden but distant crash caught her ear and she walked briskly to the source—the cloakroom? The pantry? The scullery!

The servant girl from before held a mound of plates and silverware in her arms and was throwing them into the rubbish chute, one porcelain treasure after another, their journeys ending with a distant shatter into the trash heap at the end.

"Girl!" Adriana yelled.

The waif dropped a saucer in shock.

"What are you doing? Those are the property of the crown."

"Boss told us that Her Ladyship didn't like the plates," the girl said through alarmed eyes.

Her Ladyship?

"There is no queen in this castle."

"Boss said I wasn't supposed to say anything about Her Ladyship to you."

Adriana's hand gripped the hilt of her sword and turned on her heel, walking quickly up the stairs back to the great dining hall. The sound of more plates being tossed down the chute echoed in the stone hall behind her. The chilly goosebumps where the Custodi had blessed her began to feel more and more like a preemptive apology.

Her eyes raced to the other servants she passed. One hurriedly looked away. Another snuck through a passage to the servants' quarters. One was shaking out a fresh banner—a thorny rose sewn onto plush velvet—and Adriana broke into a full run toward her king.

The leather of her soles pounded the stone underfoot and the edges of her armor clanged together in her hurry, and as she burst into the great dining hall she skidded to a stupefied halt.

In the moment she reacted immediately, but in memory it was a tiny eternity, pregnant with significance.

At the other end of the great dining hall, a resolute woman in a strange jacket was braced in a full-body grimace, her firm arms gripping the shoulders of King Brago (*how?!*) and a rondel dagger buried deep in the neck of her king. For the first time in her life, Adriana was flummoxed. The woman in the

strange jacket looked too solid to be a ghost, yet as she struggled to bury the dagger deeper her arms moved with a strange blur and shimmer of light. The king's mouth was open in a soundless shout. The woman changed her grip on the glimmering violet dagger and met eyes with Adriana across the room. The captain of the guard of the High City of Paliano remembered how to breathe.

And then she remembered what her job was.

She closed the distance and lurched forward. Adriana did not know the nature of her foe, but she knew the physics of her king. She drew her sword and swung it directly through the face of King Brago in an attempt to slice through his assassin. Adrenaline and fear stretched the seconds. In the instant of her swing Adriana locked eyes with the assassin. As her sword passed harmlessly through the face of Brago, she watched as the flesh of the assassin became translucent violet, the stranger's eyes boring into Adriana's.



Art by Chris Rallis

Her attack negated, Adriana quickly dropped her sword and lurched forward as the assassin released and dropped Brago to the ground. Adriana instinctively tried to catch her king and was stunned when it actually worked—the spiritual tie that Brago had to his armor was dying alongside him, and Adriana found herself clutching the armor with the dying spirit of her king still inside.

His death was unlike any Adriana had witnessed before. It was impossible to look away.

The crook in Brago's neck where the assassin had buried her knife was rapidly corroding, the ghostly skin deteriorating and dissipating in a violet necrosis as it spread from the throat across the form of his body. As the virus traveled over his skin it left nothing but air in its wake, and in a matter of seconds the king's form had vanished.

Brago's gently glowing crown, form made physical with the absence of its host, dropped to the ground. His sword remained sheathed on the belt.

Where her king once lay was now a pile of abandoned, shimmering garments, glistening in Captain Adriana's arms.

The assassin looked down at Adriana with a look of slightly bored accomplishment.



Kaya, Ghost Assassin | Art by Chris Rallis



Adriana grabbed Brago's sword out of its sheath. She was uncertain of the assassin's next move. The assassin stood with the lazy confidence of someone who just woke up—dressed for a night at the pub

instead of a day in the fighting pits. It was hateful. Adriana rushed her, Brago's glimmering sword gripped tight in her hand.

"*Villain!*" she snarled.

Adriana thrust the sword directly into where the assassin's liver would be. In an instant the assassin's stomach turned a bizarre and translucent violet, the sword passing easily through her. What should have been a life-taking injury was a minor inconvenience—the assassin grinned at Adriana's frozen shock.

Adriana collected her wits and swiftly pulled her slice upward, sword passing through the suddenly purple, unarmored torso of the assassin, through her shoulder. As her blade reached the height of its swing, Adriana took a sharp, surprising, very corporeal elbow to the jaw from the assassin. Adriana wasn't expecting that. The captain of the guard clumsily found her balance and purposefully stood back to assess her opponent.

"I was paid to hit only one mark. I'm not going to kill you," the assassin said.

Adriana's rage seethed through ragged breath. "Fight me fair, coward!"

The assassin's lips parted in an amused smile, and she returned a playful wink.

The captain of the guard responded by spitting directly at the stranger's eye.

In a flash the assassin's face shimmered with willful transparency and the spittle easily passed through to hit the wall behind her.

"Haven't had to dodge that before," the assassin said. Grinning, she stepped forward *through* Brago's empty armor on the floor. Her feet and shins shimmered with that same strange violet as she passed through the clutter of metal.

"You put an awful lot of effort into defending an empty suit," the assassin said with a sly drawl.

"That *man* was our *king*—"

"I heard he was an empty suit long before I put my dagger in him. And before that he was a *tyrant*," the assassin said. "As long as tyrants die, the chance for freedom lives."

Adriana was struck with an odd wave of guilt. She didn't know how to respond to that.

The assassin casually bowed, maintaining an amused eye contact with the captain of the guard. "Pleasure doing business with you."

The stranger straightened her jacket smartly and dropped into the floor. She descended in a quick ripple of violet. Adriana could only stare dumbly at the spot on the floor she disappeared through. *The stables are directly underneath. There's no way I could catch her in time.*

The great dining hall was quiet. In that silent moment, Adriana let her breath out in a sigh. Brago's armor and crown lay in a heap in the spot where he fell. No evidence remained of his spirit save the light glow that lingered on his newly corporeal armor and crown. Adriana had never seen a ghost die before—perhaps it was normal for their belongings to materialize as their spirits vanished into a second death.

None of it made sense. None of it was possible.

I was foolish to accept this position, Adriana thought. My job was to protect the king, and I failed at protecting a man who couldn't be killed. What purpose did I serve in the first place?

The castle started to stir in realization. Banners bearing a thorny rose were unfurled. Servants came with dark curiosity to inspect the empty armor on the floor. Through it all, Adriana stayed silent at the back of the great dining hall.

Adriana's fingers grazed the hilt of Brago's sword. She supposed it would be safest in her hands.



Art by Chris Rallis

The Custodi crowned Queen Marchesa, the First of her Name, the following day.

The ceremony was held in an immaculately decorated throne room. Banners bearing the sign of the Black Rose draped from freshly dusted rafters, new armor of thorny plates gleamed silver in the lights of candles dipped the prior week. The room was fresh with rare primroses and stunk of new clothes.

The castle staff looked at the new queen with familiarity. The Custodi obligingly went through the script of the coronation ceremony. None of the Paliano elite seemed unprepared. Everyone was ready. Everyone knew.

Adriana ached to kill each of these traitors where they stood. Every spare inch of the room bore the sigil of the new queen and it was *all wrong*.

Earlier that morning when she had spoken with the guard, Adriana was relieved to find all of them as deep in the dark as she was. The great secret had been hidden from them, as well, and the captain of the guard was relieved to hear that at least her company burned with the same confusion and rage she did.

They stood now at her back and attending each door. The guard had their duty to crown and church, but none of them were happy about it. Brago's sword—she wouldn't dare lose sight of it—had remained tight in her palm through the duration of the ceremony.

Marchesa, the Black Rose, stood in the middle of it all, the dazzling conductor of a hideous symphony. Her gown was prudent and her jewelry humble, save for the glimmering ghostly crown that sat atop

her head. Adriana did everything she could to not roll her eyes at the obvious attempt at modest attire to please the Custodi.

As soon as the spirits were finished with the coronation and the ghostly crown of Paliano sat on Marchesa's head, Adriana moved quickly to follow her to the royal chambers. She walked upstairs and behind the new queen, past a sea of averted eyes, followed by a gaggle of handmaidens in her wake. As they walked, Adriana began to realize how much *money* must have gone into this endeavor. Bribes to pay off the Custodi. Money to pay off the staff. Payment for the assassin. And then there was the matter of the heaps upon heaps of rose-embroidered textiles that adorned the walls, bodies, horses of the castle.



Art by Titus Lunter

And I had no idea. I watched for so long over the shoulder of a careless ghost and I had no idea.

Adriana gave pause.

If I had known, would I have stopped it? Brago was cruel. He deserved a second death.

Adriana studied the back of Marchesa as they all marched upstairs. What happened before would happen again. A king would be crowned, killed, replaced. A queen would be crowned, killed, replaced. And how many hundreds of her countrymen would die in the process of perpetuating this hideous cycle?

It is an endless engine.

All we are doing is feeding this awful machine.

Rage filled Adriana's heart as the realization set in and the assassin's words echoed in her mind. *As long as tyrants die, the chance for freedom lives.* Paliano had their chance for freedom with the death of one tyrant and instead gained another. *Killing them off isn't enough. How can we turn that chance into certainty?*

Marchesa stopped in front of the doors to her chamber and allowed a servant girl to usher her in. Adriana followed, patiently waiting by the door as the handmaidens helped the new queen change from the coronation gown to the gown she would wear to address the public for the first time.

Her handmaidens disassembled her, revealing layer after hidden layer. Gown. Partlet. Farthingale. Kirtle. Petticoat. Bodice. When she was down to her stockings and shift, the handmaidens built her back up again, this time in garments more luxurious and finely made than before. Adriana could see the stitches that hid countless inner pockets, the secret lining to conceal pouches of rare poisons. Bodice. Petticoat. Kirtle. Farthingale. Partlet. Gown. The handmaidens topped the endless opulence by securing a chest plate.

There was no seduction in this chore, only a simple dominance when the queen met eyes with her captain of the guard. Endless layers containing endless secrets. Do you see how much I carry? Can you fathom how much I hide?

Once the last stay was tightened, Marchesa shooed her handmaidens out. Adriana stood tall and firm in stance before the velvet-drenched queen of the High City of Paliano.

"I sense you have words for me," the poisonmaster cooed. "My coronation speech to the citizens begins shortly, so please be quick with my time."

"This isn't how right of succession works."

"This isn't how right of succession works, *your highness*."

Adriana swallowed a snarl. "The Custodi claimed you were named in King Brago's will as his heir. You know I am no scholar, so perhaps you can be the one to explain to me why a *ghost* would need a *will*."

The new queen smiled. Her answer came easily. "The undying have no need to protect their assets, of course. But the Custodi was very willing to accept properly filed legal documents."

The captain of the guard's armor clinked as she stepped forward. "Brago had descendants, his daughters are—"

"Old and weak-willed. *Their* sons and daughters are just as bad. I dealt with them a while ago, however, and it just so happened that my name was next in the line of succession."

Her name? Marchesa's family was small and distant in the royal family tree. Adriana felt nauseated. She held her ground as Marchesa calmly strode to the vanity near her, sitting daintily to apply an oxblood-red stain to her lips.

The question escaped without restraint. "How many of the other successors did you kill?"

"I only killed Brago," Marchesa said with an admmissive eye roll. "Well, *Kaya* killed Brago. Paid her good money for it, too. The rest of the former king's family received a very generous grievance and the Custodi will receive a healthy tithing during each year of my reign."

The queen stood and smiled through venom-painted lips, "I pray that everyone who claimed me a fallen daughter of a fallen house enjoyed *their* fall from the High City."

Adriana had stared down many a foe over her years of service. She had dealt with her share of household pests as well. This snake was no different. "Our city will not turn over to you so easily."

"They already have," Marchesa said plainly. She stood from the vanity and opened a chest under the window. From where Adriana stood she could see, peeking out of the interior of the chest, a brilliant and shining suit of armor. The queen lifted the black-rose-adorned breastplate so the captain could inspect it from where she stood. It was clearly built for her.

"You already know I'm not putting that on."

"I felt I should offer it at least."

Adriana shook her head in disbelief. "And what about the people?"

"They will adore me," Marchesa said, leaving the chest to return to her vanity. Despite only having ten fingers, she seemed to require thirty rings.

Adriana's heart quickened with rage. "And what if they don't adore you?"

Marchesa obviously hadn't considered that. She met Adriana's eyes as the captain continued.

"What if you step out to deliver your coronation speech and are met with a thousand citizens calling you a tyrant?"

"Then I will be *tyrannical*."

Adriana refused to let her eyes leave the gaze of the queen. "You won't kill me. If you do, my guard will retaliate without a second thought."

Marchesa shrugged and returned to applying rings. "Unfortunately, your deduction is correct. It is in my best interest to allow you to live," she said, her eyes shifting up. "It is in your best interest to stay in line."

Adriana spat in the Queen's face.

This time, the spit hit its target.

The Black Rose, for once in her life, did not see it coming. She sat in stunned horror, a shaking hand wiping saliva from her eye as Adriana grabbed the new armor from the chest and left.

Adriana wasted no time in letting her feelings be known.

She immediately went to where the rest of her guard was stationed and told them to find her after the coronation speech. She then made haste for the stables and tied the dreadful rose-adorned breastplate to a rope, hitching it to the back of her saddle to drag in the dirt behind her.

Adriana mounted her horse and began to ride.

The crowd making their way to the queen's speech parted in front of her. *Look at your captain*, Adriana thought, *and look at what I think of your new queen*.

In the distance she could hear Marchesa's speech, amplified for all to hear. "The former captain has retired, with thanks from our fair city and a generous pension from the throne that will support her for the rest of her life, however long that may be."

Adriana rolled her eyes and urged her horse to move on. She rode towards the Thieves' Quarter, past hundreds of her fellow citizens, and felt overcome as she rode to make a speech of her own. She slowed to a stop, looking out over the confused and alarmed faces of her people. From atop her horse Adriana felt a power she had always allowed others to wield. She was tired of standing by while those around her grasped control.

She spoke to the crowded Thieves' Quarter with unassailable conviction. "Marchesa would have you stand with her, in service to a true crown resting upon a false head, and thereby she would make you a traitor!"

Adriana raised the sword of Brago and beat the symbol of her city on her shield. “If her flag is not your flag, then do not bow to it. If her rule is illegitimate, then so too are her laws. If she is not truly queen, then the servants of the throne are no better than her spies and assassins, and should be treated accordingly!”

The crowd hummed with agreement, and Adriana’s spirit flew. *They are sick of the engine, too.*

In the weeks that followed, Brago’s forced peace gave way to Marchesa’s deep unrest. Those who served in Brago’s guard broke their oaths to the crown under cover of darkness to patrol the streets and provide protection for the citizens. With the setting sun came a switching of sigils, and the symbol of the city became a reliable marker for who could be trusted in the night.

“Do you stand with the city?” the graffiti would ask passers-by in quiet places of the city. The citizens of the High City heard the rumors and felt the disquiet. They listened to the decrees of a poisonmaster-queen and the hiss of corruption her supporters sowed. The citizens heard it all, and Adriana heard it the loudest. But after her declaration in the Thieves’ Quarter, she held her tongue. Her voice was not the one to ultimately rule the people. *I am the hand that guards the voice*, she knew. *I am the one who listens for trouble.*

And so, three moons after the night of the regicide, she traveled under cloak and cover of darkness to the home of the person she knew could help.

Adriana hadn’t slept in days. She had been listening. Listening to her guard, listening to her citizens, listening for what the people needed and why they weren’t being treated with respect by a leader who should love them. All that listening had proven one thing: Paliano didn’t need a monarchy that hid itself behind castles and assassins. It needed a leader who understood Fiora at large.

Reaching her destination, Adriana quietly rapped on an ornate door built of sturdy foreign wood. The door creaked, and she was let inside by a face anyone in Paliano would know instantly.



Art by Jesper Ejsing

The elfen explorer Selvala stood on the other side of the door and glanced over her unexpected guest.

“Adriana. You come with news?”

“I come with a proposition.”

Selvala took a second to assess the former captain. She nodded, and quietly showed Adriana in.

Selvala’s home was quaint and modest; a traveler’s home away from home.

Adriana left her cloak near the door and joined the elf at a table in front of a wood stove. Selvala, through the habit of her people, silently waited for the former captain of the guard to state her business.

There are no other options, Adriana knew. If she will not say yes then the future of our city is lost to tyrants forever.

Adriana accepted a small mug of tea the elf had set on the tabletop. She looked Selvala in the eye and built up the courage for the most important pitch she had ever given. “Paliano’s monarchy isn’t stable. It is an endless, murderous engine of violence,” Adriana said, voice steady and confident in the privacy of the elf’s home.

Selvala nodded. A small movement heavy with affirmation.

“If we as citizens wish to live for the possibility of freedom, that engine must be halted. You are well-respected among the people and a uniting force for our city,” Adriana continued, “the finest nominee for a senator I can think of.”

Selvala’s eyes widened in half-contained surprise.

Adriana leaned forward in her chair, heart burning with the conviction of an entire city. She allowed a rare smile to escape her lips as she asked the most important question she would ever ask in her life.

“Will you help us build the Republic of Paliano?”