

Why did places have bad rulers instead of good rulers? It was a question that haunted me. It was, of course, a subset of the more general question: why were things often bad instead of good?

I eventually came to the conclusion that everyone had an answer to the question but none of them were worth the hair of a donkey.

“Some people are born good and others bad, and it’s the work of the good to separate the two, and crush the bad.” So says the oral tradition of the Vikilee.

“Badness is something accrued over time, a poison of the body and later the soul, which is why elves must be reborn, and why humans die. Dwarves are hardy against evil, which is why they live long. It is of course evil of the soul that we must be wary of, and a constant battle must be fought with constant vigilance to ensure that evil breaks upon the shore of our body and does not touch the temple of the soul.” So says the folk wisdom of the Elerion steppes.

“Evil is the price of free will. For meaningful choices to exist, both good and evil must exist, else a choice could hold no meaning. Benevolent gods have allowed evil to exist such that people could truly be free.” So says the clerical tradition of the Elderwights.

There were other formulations as well, abstract universal forces of good and bad that conscripted soldiers, or a cosmic churn of moral froth, but it all felt hollow to me. If there were a truth, all the great thinkers of the world should have stumbled upon it together, in the same way that fishers and farmers the world around adopted broadly similar techniques to keep people fed.

Further study was needed.

I hid my claimed weapons away in one of the System’s more valuable features, the Inventory. I healed back from my wounds quickly by that point, having pushed myself by killing boar in the woods in the long years that passed between encounters. The System provided. The wounds scabbed, then scarred, then disappeared. Refreshed, I began my time as a student proper, as it seemed a necessary step.

I spent a year as a cleric, then a year as a scholar. It was only enough to skim the shallows, but that was all I needed to realize that these were not places to find the answers I sought. I wasn’t just learning from what I was taught, I was learning from what I watched, and I came to the conclusion that if they had the answers, they would have been better people. Instead, what passed for intellectuals in that time were too full of themselves, happy to argue endlessly with each other so long as the wine was flowing. The clergy were worse, with many using the claimed power of their gods to deflect from their own vices, or using sanctimonious piety to pretend at being a lord.

I watched their societies from top to bottom.

I saw that the man in the street would often act wrongly where he thought he could get away with it. This was a source of disordered societies. On many nights I would nurse a drink in a

tavern, or watch the city streets from above, stepping lightly so as not to wake those who were sleeping. I watched criminals go about their business and tried to determine what was wrong with them, how they had *become* criminals. It was often a complicated affair.

Most criminals had people in their lives who weren't directly involved in criminal activity themselves, but these friends and family always seemed complicit to me, as they looked the other way and didn't report anything to the police or guard or whoever was supposed to be doing the enforcement. I wondered sometimes whether it was mere profit that made the criminals tolerable to people not directly involved with crime, but decided that perhaps it was simply harder to rat out a lifelong friend or a family member who'd be punished harshly.

I watched the police, and the guards, and saw how they often had criminals among their number too, whether it was with law or custom on their side. When the guards weren't criminals themselves, they were often complicit in their own ways, choosing what and where to police, using their discretion, bending the rules in ways that must have seemed, to them, noble. When they had a friend who was behaving lawlessly, it was simple harmless fun that no right-thinking person could possibly punish. When someone they didn't know did the same thing, it was cause for severe punishment.

I watched those who made the rules, whether they be councilors, legislators, nobles, or kings. These were the people with the most power, and they often made shockingly poor use of it. Sometimes it was simple hedonism, but often these were good people, or as good as people got, trying their best to do right by the people they had power over. They often did poorly.

It's painfully obvious now that the problem was the culture.

When I look back on my notes, to the extent I've saved them, I cringe at the fumbling explanations I made for what was happening. If I could, I would go back in time and slap myself. Who knows, with the powers of the multiverse, perhaps that day might come. But in those times, I simply didn't see it. I thought I could use other methods to fix the illness.

So I must admit now that I took it into my head to elevate good rulers and give them the tools necessary for *true* rule. I was, sadly, a monarchist, though not in the modern style. I am sure that many who have known me, especially those who were alive during those first years of revolution, will be shocked and saddened to hear it. That heartbreak will grow worse when they realize just how successful I was in my pursuits.

I started in the Kingdom of Gardida. Their king was competent, as kings went, but beholden to a system of internal alliances and interests, which all worked against each other. Gardida was friendly with elves, in that they saw us as superior and exotic, which meant that it was easy enough for me to first become the sort of interesting house guest that kings collect, and later take a role as an advisor. I was considered to have remarkable instincts, thanks in part to both Perception Check and Observe, and my seeming neutrality made me reliable in the way that others were not.

I became close with the king's son, who was to take the throne, and filled his head with all my learnings of what it took to make for a good king and a good kingdom, a place where people

could thrive. I had thought, then, that a king could simply decree goodness from on high and that it would trickle down to those below like some sort of grand fountain, that the right set of laws was the way to make it all work. All that was needed was a single good person installed as king and everything would follow from that, so long as the king had real power rather than power gained from myriad alliances.

The prince learned from me that the first step would be to take as much power as he could, the better to guide his people.

I had not lived in a monarchy before stepping through the portal, yet I still somehow felt the pull of them, which is why I let it happen. What if everything could be solved by a single strong man at the top, putting everyone into line, a man who was wise and decisive, who knew his kingdom backward and forward, who was kind and virile and even-tempered? The goodness would flow, surely. The king would be its wellspring. Perhaps this thinking harkens back to the idea of having a protective father or a loving mother and being sheltered, as a child, from the dangers and storms. I see it now as an infantile instinct, obviously.

Three years into this project of grooming the prince, another thresholder arrived, Ermine. She was fiery-haired and spunky, a cultist from a world of dark gods who warred with each other using warped and twisted powers, though she'd gone through her portal with none of them. She had won the world before and gained dark energies in the process, powers tied with what that world had defined as sin. She took to sin like a fish to water, especially those sins she viewed as being harmless acts of debauchery — but not only those. Before we met properly, she'd spent a full month attending as many parties as possible, ingesting copious amounts of alcohol and making her body available to whomever wanted it. By that time I no longer believed that evil was a matter of corruption, but *she* believed, and the dark powers attached to her did too.

She targeted the prince. It is my understanding now that the thresholders will always be geared toward conflict with each other, but I had some questions at that time, and had believed that perhaps I would find someone like-minded, a person I could work with who shared my vision. In this case, it was clearly unworkable right from the start.

We fought each other, at first with barbed words in mixed company, and later with blades drawn on the castle ramparts. I was foolishly trying to convert her, and she was just as foolishly trying to convert me. We came to blows many times, and sometimes would meet in the parlor the next day needing to explain our limps and scratches. She enjoyed the fighting, and grew more powerful from it, as that too was sin according to the dark powers she carried with her. Often she was drunk, or gripped by the impulses of other substances, and there were many chances to kill her, if I had wanted to. In spite of the power she was accumulating, I was always the stronger of the two of us. Still, she might have been the last opponent that I had anything to fear from, especially in the later days.

We lasted together for half a year, which was far longer than either of us had expected. The fights became formalities, and sometimes they were conversations instead. There was something loveable about her, for as much as she was a wreck of a person. She felt shame for the things she'd done, guilt and embarrassment, and I found it laudable that she would share

that shame with me, and admired the way she would persist in her path even as those feelings washed over her. I wouldn't have found that strength.

Eventually it came to a head, as it was destined to. She was turning the prince to her side, corrupting him, making all my work seem like it was for nothing. She had awakened something in him that was, perhaps, there all along, and she was able to fan those dark flames far faster and more effectively than I could put them out. I was heartbroken, in the way that elves of my sort get when a plan has gone to seed. We had one of our battles, which had become nearly routine, and when I would normally have stayed my hand, I slipped a dagger into the side of her neck. It went in like that was its sheath, the happy home that it had been waiting for during the years I'd owned it. Shock was written on her face, then she collapsed to the ground, dead.

The portal opened, and I didn't take it.

The prince proved a failure, too corrupt or corruptible, too much of a bad egg to ever fruitfully take the throne, not after what Ermine had done to and with him. He howled in rage and pointed a finger at me, telling me that he would use the absolute authority he was soon to receive to have me killed.

I murdered him too, then went on my way.

I found another kingdom, and another prince, and started over, knowing better now what worked and what didn't, what arguments could be used to sway a young man and what events could be spun into lessons about governance and the ways of power. I also spent more time on picking this prince, and probing him for weaknesses — looking for a certain darkness of the soul. Upon determining to my satisfaction that he was a blank slate upon which I could imprint myself, I set to work with a furious energy, intending not to be in a position for failure the next time a thresholder showed up.

If you are at all a student of the history of this world, you will be familiar with the name of Luperto the First.

If you are *not* a student of this world's history, I suppose everything I say here will sound like boasting by proxy, but given the failures of the Age of Kings, it shouldn't be taken as such. I believe *now* that Luperto was simply exceptional, not a product of my teachings and theories, but a unique individual whose particular properties made the whole thing workable. Over the course of twenty years, he turned his country from a backwater into a prosperous place, with a campaign of reform that touched every aspect of the country's institutions, making them solid as iron. Not a year went by when he didn't have some new triumph. He was heralded as a savior of his people, the golden son who could do no wrong.

Everything had seemed like as complete a success as it could possibly have been. I was actually anticipating that I *would* take the next portal, once I defeated the next thresholder to come through. There had been a few during the reign of Luperto, three that were not much worthy of note, killed swiftly once I heard of them — and it was the case with thresholders, in those days, that I *did* hear of them relatively soon. I handled them as quietly as I could, and learned as much as I could in the course of fighting them, sometimes with an interrogation once

they were defeated and at my mercy. Most acquired Implements before our battle, some quirk of the Grand Spell, no doubt, though in later years they were more varied in what they brought to bear against me. I grew stronger with every battle, and stored their Implements away in my Inventory, which made me stronger still.

The timing of these thresholders was irregular. Five years seemed to be the average, but sometimes it was less and sometimes more, and that made it difficult to plan around. I'd noticed the tendency toward opposition, and once I noticed it, I resolved that we would find ourselves in opposition as soon as I learned of them, no matter their orientation. You likely understand it intuitively, after so much time, but if conflict is foretold by the Grand Spell, then declaring that you will only fight against someone who threatens Luperto the First will guarantee that Luperto the First will be threatened. Because I had committed to finding and killing anyone who came through the portals, they would sometimes appear far away, with goals that were orthogonal to my kingdom-building. One of them wanted to coat the planet with magical forests, another intended to father a hundred children, and the third was a simple hedonist.

I had thought I had it all figured out, you see, that after a few short decades on this planet I had mastered both how to make a society good and how to defeat the Grand Spell's designs. Laughable, I'm sure.

The next thresholder became an advisor, much as I had been. He was crafty and cunning, possessed of a power that grew over time, and he was in no particular rush to meet me, which is why he went a full three years before making himself known. In that time, he had encouraged a council of elders to have a single hereditary ruler from among them, shepherded them through a period of civil unrest, then consolidated power. If I had any appreciation for scheming, I would have called it masterful.

If you have checked the history books, you will understand that king to be Seldemar the Dread.

His next step was making a great and terrible war. The term for it came from my opponent, total war, an expression which has been much used and abused in the centuries that followed, but here meant that every single one of the king's subjects was devoting himself to the task of winning the war. Every brick that was made went toward building fortifications. Every ounce of ore brought up from the mines was used to make blades and armor. Trees were chopped down by the hundred to make ships. There was, in theory, no aspect of either country that was not dominated by war, and that included all aspects of diplomacy.

The world had never seen war like it, and neither had I. It horrified me, as I'm sure you can imagine, unless you come from a world where such wars are common. And even after I had dispatched the enemy thresholder, a man whose flesh pulled like taffy and who drew power from ritual sacrifice, the war raged on.

I watched everything I had built crumble. I first blamed that other thresholder, but later, after reflection, I blamed myself. The lesson I took was that it wasn't enough to have a single good kingdom to serve as an example to others, it needed to be the entire *world*, but after the war finally died down, Luperto began to grow erratic. He had suffered from seizures his entire life,

and I suspect that they began to infect his brain, though a surgeon thresholder I spoke with once thought it unlikely. I had trained Luperto's son to be a replacement, but the boy wasn't as keen as his father was, and having grown up in the trauma of that long war, had quirks of his own that I wasn't enamored with.

It took another decade for me to realize how singularly fragile a system of kings can be, how prone to corruption and misuse they are. A king must not only be a firm and just ruler, but must be nearly perfect at selecting and training a successor. He must be exceptional at delegation and monitoring, and never falter. This is what makes the system of kings unworkable in the long run, which I had failed to appreciate.

I was, by that point, nearly unbeatable in single combat. It seemed as though my opponents had gotten somewhat worse over time, even as I had continued to improve. I had poached my first armor by that point, not an Implement but something a would-be thresholder had worn. I've often found those with defensive powers to be the most annoying to fight, but also the most worthwhile to take from. Because I was winning so handily, I took to capture and interrogation where I could. Since they came so infrequently, I had plenty of time to prepare for them.

The Age of Kings spread beyond my control though, and I was there to watch all its failures. People had seen the terrible might of the war and there was a wave of strong men sweeping into power, some of them kings in all but name, other kings who had cause to consolidate and reform. I had missed how much of a role ego played in the decisions of lesser kings, given how much Luperto had blinded me, but it was there, of course.

Worse were the ways in which two decent kings would clash, often over resources. These conflicts predated the Age of Kings, of course, but it somehow felt as though territorial disputes were being exacerbated, perhaps by the notion that these were material properties that the kings held. Or perhaps it was something else, the way a king felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. When times were tough, when there were famines and plagues, the behavior of the kings grew worse. It seemed to me that if we could solve the problem of prosperity, things might get better.

I introduced the lanterns then, thinking that they would solve conflicts. I'd been working on them in the background, to the best of my abilities, but we'd have gotten nowhere without the money and talent procured by yet another king. The promise of the lanterns was that they would allow famine, at least, to be a thing of the past, and should war come again, they weren't so dangerous on a battlefield, being cleaner and more sterile, and with metal as a protector against them. I suppose in my mind, I had thought that wars would only be fought with heavy protection and the common soldier pulled from the farmlands would be no more.

Instead, the wars grew more terrible than before. The soldiers were sent to the front lines armed with what metal they could, and focused lanterns would burn their exposed skin. I went to the battlefields and watched screaming men carried off, then later, in the cities, I would see beggars who'd been blinded in the war, men who'd lost arms or legs and had difficulty providing for themselves.

And still I had hope that the lanterns would *provide* for people, that they would be engines of creation that would set the farmers free from toil, that they would make labor take a tenth the time it once had. I saw that hope, too, swirl gently down the drain. The lanterns were too complicated to make and maintain, which meant that they became the province of the rich, or of the kings. The kings knew that this was a new form of control, and those who sought riches saw that it was a tool that was best hoarded if they wished to increase their wealth. The lanterns grew bigger as an understanding of their working grew, centralizing power, giving a lever with which to move the world. That lever did not push the world in a good direction, not by default.

The effluence came early on, while the lanterns were still being deployed. It had been harmless and turned toxic, thanks to a thresholder whose system of magic used the neutral effluence as raw fuel. There was something that changed in the character of the world on her entry, a fundamental shift in what was possible that I must admit frightened me to my core. It meant that at any moment, with the right person coming through the portal, what had been true the day before might be false the day after.

I knew, as I watched the lanterns spread and change nothing, that I would need to create something *robust*, something that could withstand any challenge, a system of governance which was correct for every condition, which could withstand changes in the world.

I had seen to my satisfaction that monarchies were inherently unstable things, dependent too much on a single person, even if they were a good person — a *great* person. Perhaps if immortality had been a gift I could have given to everyone, rather than an innate quality of the elves of my world, I would have felt differently. Then it would only have been a matter of arranging a redundant council of kings for a kingdom — and in fact, for the whole world, given that conflicts between kings were one of the main causes of strife.

And yet I *still* didn't stumble on the idea of changing the culture and creating something from whole cloth. Culture was, at the time, invisible to me. I knew that people in different countries did things differently, but I was still mired in thinking of these as distinctions between races or peoples, something that was innate to them. I hadn't realized how *malleable* people were, or how easy they were to change, how much they *wanted* to change, and to change others. A good culture spreads itself, reinforces itself, has mechanisms of defense and processes of change, and I had simply been taking them as a given, something that needed to be worked around. I was a painter constrained to only a fraction of the canvas.

But all that would come later, and I suppose is for another time.

What I did instead was to engage in intensive study. I built the first of my hideyholes, places where I could ensconce myself away from civilization and wait for time to pass. My aim was to keep the enemy thresholders from impacting the world too much, while at the same time, running as many experiments as possible on the world at large. With the Age of Kings and the introduction of the lanterns, we were in a period of change, which wasn't the best time to understand what sweeping changes were needed.

I look back on the bumps and bruises along the way, the needless deaths — and the needful ones too — and think that I can do better next time. The culture, having been built once, will necessarily be easier to build again in a different world.