



Corona ex Doloze I

Thorns and briars
Weeds and vines
All entwine to strangle out all life.
They prick at the greedy
They choke out the meek
They guard the gate
Till the chosen break free

Come ye', one and all
Come, hear and see
The rise of the House

Forged in suffering
The rise of the Kingdom
Born of pain.

War is on the horizon
The ravens are circling
All that is left is for the crown to pass
From pretender
To chosen



Light cascades through cracks in the stone, illuminating a lone man upon a wooden throne. His long dreadlocks hang across the side of his face. His head rests in the palm of a worn hand. Sweat trickles down his brow, tracing paths through the wrinkles of battle and time.

With a slow, weary breath, Lord Isaiah lifts his gaze. Before him stands a sprawling table, a map of the land that he's always called home. On it are scattered wooden figures, of knights and siege towers, footmen and holy warriors. His free other hand teeters the figure of a king, swaying it from side to side, threatening a topple.

A game of chess comes to life.

Five armies are scattered across his home. Some small realms clawing for dominion. A single forest rebellion of gypsies, another an ambitious horde of mountain barbarians, the last a cultic order threatening a theocracy.

Raven, Richard, Kline.

Three houses Isaiah holds little contempt for. They have skirmished, crossing boundaries, stealing grain or raiding villages. Petty acts of desperation fit for their ilk. Nothing unexpected.

But the fourth and the fifth...

The first, Wayfarer - the house that stole his colors.

No land, no crown, no legacy. A phantom kingdom born of betrayal. Like a tumor that had found its own feet, it tore itself from his side and took over the roads and pathways. Once simply a rag-tag bunch of bandits now they grew arrogant... Arrogance fueled by their new leader, the betrayer.

His brother - Lord Bryce.

And then there is the fifth.

Set apart. Consecrated. The pieces were encased in white marble, not for purity or regality but to stand against the grain. A house that did not belong. A kingdom of rot masquerading as holy ground. A tyrant and his demons gilded in excess and deceit. This was the blight that turned Lord Isaiah's realm into a playground of debauchery. It was this house that held the crown that belonged on his head.

And as the dawn breaks through the cracks in the stone, as light shines into his empty throne room... The Lord of the Thorned Crown knows the time for games have ended.

The war has begun.



Sebastian-Everett Bryce.

A man so conceited that he demands seconds from all who would dare speak his name. Seconds to breathe in the regality of his legacy, to bask in the shadow of his stature.

A dung-eating grin. A flowing cape. A stance that screams, "look at me."

I've had the displeasure of standing next to you for far too long. For a fleeting moment, I thought we were *becoming* something. That perhaps your stretch had finally washed off, and that perhaps, our visions were aligned.

That, perhaps, together, we could reclaim this kingdom and make it our own. Rebuild it not in *my* image or yours, but in **ours**.

A kingdom of strength and unity, against the many forces that plague it. A realm of opportunity - of triumph for all who would bleed for it.

Y'know, brother dearest.. I truly believed we could have done it.
I was willing to stand by your side.
To face the evils of House King, *together*.

But only for a moment.

You have cleared the fog with your blindness. You have helped me see with your cowardice.

You willingly overlook the blisteringly obvious.

Black.

Really? The wretch you dragged into my halls... The parasite I buried underneath my heel -
my unknowing favour to you.

You run back to the dirt that you rose from. Do you not remember how we bled to rise to our
throne, how by our own strength we found each other at the top. How we built this house
brick by brick when nobody else thought we could.

And yet, you return the disease of... **Black.**

I freed you from his clutches, I let your wings breath.

You rose to the top... You ruled with a strong hand... And now you return?

Once again you coat your wings with the grease of Black.
Sebastian... You are chaining yourself down. *Brother*, you must see it.

This is your kingsguard? Your knight? Your protector?

Black will not die for you, Sebastian. He will be the reason you drown.
Mark my words.

And not only him, but also **the crownless king**.

The man who claims royalty but has spent most of his life with his belly writhing in the dirt. A man who bleeds for no cause but his own personal glee - the **Bandit-Lord, Green. Green** who drinks himself senselessly simply to forget his humiliation, **Green** who crawls from his pit only when the hangover fades - desperate for another coin, another bruise to feel alive.

Green who sells his body to the fighting pits for one more taste of relevance.

This is who you call... Your hand?

He is old. yet unwise. Gristled, but broken. Legendary, yet only for shame.

This is your hand? Your wise counsel? Green will only drag you into his pit of obscurity.

And yet... I see why you did it.

My light was too much for you to bear. Too bright for you to stand beside.

You wanted to shine. You saw only strength here... But there is a weakness there. So you exploited it.

You cut the Bandit Queen's legs out from under her, subjugated her under your might.. And made Granger's Bandit Hordes your own.

You left our home, to rise alone... And for that I almost applaud you.

You surround yourself with filth, but at least you show ambition. A hunger I had feared was long dead.

You seemed content to let the crown pass through our hands. Content to be a Lord, never a king. Perhaps you saw my thirst, my refusal to bend to Kieran's sceptre...

When the war horn was raised, and you refused to step into the light, when I leaped at the opportunity... I thought you were lost for good. Perhaps that is when fear crept into your black heart.

Fear that drove you to flee my side, crushed by my light. Fear that led you to a house infested with rats that you desperately needed to call your own.

At least... In the dust of irrelevancy - in the ashes of the road you now wander... You've found your hunger once more.

And for that, I welcome it with open arms.

Sebastian-Everrett Bryce... I look forward to facing you on the field..

I look forward to putting our lifetime of rivalry into the ground for good.

I look forward to clearing my way to the crown, **through you... *Brother.***



A raven caws from his balcony's ledge.

Once, that balcony had been the pulpit of kings - where rulers addressed their people, where Isaiah himself once stood as sovereign over **all** the lands, not **merely** his duchy.

Now it crumbled under the weight of neglect.

Isaiah steps to the edge. The wind carries the scent of ash and rain as he reaches for the note tied to the raven's side. He is no longer king but his reach remains long and winding. His channels run deep, spies across every court.

A thick lock of hair binds the note shut.

“Tactorious will execute PP at sundown on the morrow.”

His brow lifts. The tyrant grows bold.

The People's Princess.

House Knickleman was no stranger to the throne. Once a dynasty of power under Lord Charles - it had fallen hard since the vagrant Kieran tore the crown from his hands. Charles was no saint, nor was his house one of honor... But they were dangerous.

King Kieran took their land, took their honour.... But to kill the princess, the disgraced Lord's sister? Brazen... Folly.

Lady Jennifer was no helpless maiden. A scholar with the blade, a warrior with wit. Her loyalty had always lay with the people, not the throne. Her capture broke no law of war but her execution certainly would. Such foolishness!

In her brilliance, the lady was loved. She was the blade of the voiceless - the dagger that found the oppressors throat in the night... At least according to the midwife's tales. To kill her publicly would not end her cause, it would ignore it.

It was uncouth, reckless.

It defined Kieran. It frustrated Isaiah that such a man had such strength. This irreverent child had gone unpunished for too long. A fool king who seemed to keep winning.

And this dangerous move of his... Was probably part of the King's plans. To destabilize the people, bring out the rats, start a war... So he can truly crush his enemies. Kieran seemed foolish but he was a snake, and to him no morality stood in the way of absolute victory.

Isaiah turns from the window and returns to his table. The lock of Jennifer's hair still rests in his palm, soft yet heavy with implication.

He places it right by The Duke Tactorious' land, at the edge of Kieran's own territory.

...The same land that once belonged to Lord Charles.

The land that birthed Lady Nickleman.

Isaiah would lose nothing from Jennifer's death, but in war - every event was a door. Lady Jennifer could yet serve him - her knowledge of Kieran's lands, her networks of spies. The dishonoured maiden could be the key to the Thorned Crown's ascent.

She could not die, not yet.

But to save her was stepping into Tactorious' domain. Within Kieran's reach. He could, of course, crush the foolish Duke with one hand idling behind his back. Tactorious was nothing more than a puppet of muscles. But if the Devil-Spawn Kristoffer or the legendary Shadow Knight of Dee came to his aid... Isaiah's forces would fall.

He would need more soldiers.

He would need magick to challenge the undead prince.

Wisdom and strength to match the Knight.

With his brother gone, Isaiah would have to rebuild his council, his generals... His thorns.

The hand that had rested on the map now drifts toward the blade lying beside his wooden throne, the steel gleaming faintly in the rising Sun's light.

A slow smile crosses his face.

He would march... And he would gather.

It was time to summon **The House of the Thorned Crown.**



King Kieran.

Again and again your hair rises. You faced the many to first forge your crown. At Three-Rivers, you brought even Charles to his knees. At Hallow's Eve, you smiled while the rest of us were covered in blood.

You seem unstoppable.

Seem.

You have always fought alone. For yourself. Even against the demons of the dark rainbow, you stood alone. Until war blew in, and you smelled a threat... Or opportunity. Seeing you, a common street rat, surrounded by bannermen... Should be laughable.

Yet somehow you've found yourself bannermen as filthy as you are. Mirrors to your evil. Sellwords, Meat shields... Fodder.

Men, animals who bleed with the same arrogance as you.

Tell me honestly, *King*: When you signed your pact and let the Spawn of hell into your ranks - did you really think a creature born of chaos is what you needed? That he'd somehow bind himself to your heel? You saw how he humiliated Duke Dyson, enslaved one of our own, do you honestly believe he could be your shield? That arrogance will put his blade at your throat the instant your gaze wanders.

You have no house, Kieran. You are a pretend-king, with a pretend-house, with pretend-bannermen. Men... And things that'll stab you the moment it's kinder. Your throne has been built on your loneliness, and your downfall will be just the same.

You play at kingship, but you lack the one that makes kings endure: men who would joyfully die for them.

I built mine with men who would die for it. I give lesser men purpose. I give greater men reason to look beyond themselves. I've never been the strongest, but I've always been King.

My might is thorn-born: Battles, blood, bruises and scars. The many men and women who have sharpened me. Even when I sought to rise on my own, the crucible found me. People flock to me, King. Whether they know it or admit it, they yearn to serve me, to elevate me.

Because standing by my side - it makes everyone look better. My light shines so bright it illuminates even the most tired of fighters, the most prideful of emperors. From Duke Kaye to Sebastian (despite his momentary rebellion), from the Raven to even Charles... I have led many to glory.

I am the King of Thorns, my kingdom is my strength.

Your generals are your greatest weakness.

You won't even be their last bag of coins.

Tactorious? The first of Xtremia to run to your heels and lap at your feet. A man who thinks he has authority when clearly he's never ruled a day in his life. So eager is he to be of use that the second your call came he greedily answered. You will find the field is not kind to men who trade loyalty for convenience. Lord knows how many alliances Tactorious has signed and abandoned.

The Shadow Knight of Dee - A man whose legends are terrifying but has seemed eager to return to retirement. I won't begin to guess how you lured him to your side, and from which shadow you found him... It would not surprise me if it was simply the promise of a coin.

But what I am certain of is this: He was never a man of honor or of evil, and his standing by your and Arroyo's side cannot be what he desires. He has no backbone, never has, no moral compass nor glorious dream. He fights when he desires and flees when he gets bored.

His strength has waned, his legend disappearing from memory. The Shadow Knight is but a shadow of his former self and I am eager to give him the right push he needs to retire. Perhaps when the vampire betrays you, he will run off too.

Kieran... You will soon be alone, and in War that'll be your end.

I'll show you what true Royalty looks like. I will pry that crown off your head and send you back to the streets where you came. Die in your loneliness, Kieran - that is all you've ever been destined for.





Lady Jennie

The Centurion

Sorceress Knightley