Emperor of Thorns (The Broken Empire, Book 3)

Emperor of Thorns is the explosive conclusion to Mark Lawrence's *Broken Empire* trilogy, where **Jorg Ancrath**—the most ruthless and compelling antihero in modern fantasy—makes his final play for ultimate power. Now a hardened king at just twenty years old, Jorg marches toward the **Congression**, where the Hundred Kingdoms' rulers will vote to crown an emperor. But his path is littered with corpses, betrayals, and the ghosts of his own brutal past:

- The **Dead King's** necrotic empire spreads like a plague
- The **Hidden Library's** apocalyptic secrets threaten all reality
- Jorg's **stolen memories** resurface with devastating consequences

Told through Lawrence's signature razor-sharp prose and dual timelines, this finale forces Jorg to confront whether he's the world's destroyer or its last, unlikely hope. With a climax that redefines grimdark fantasy, *Emperor of Thorns* cements Jorg's legacy as a protagonist who's equal parts monster, genius, and tragic product of a broken world.

Chapter 1: The Story So Far

The chapter "The Story So Far" provides a recap of key events from the first two books in the *Emperor of Thorns* series, focusing on protagonist Jorg Ancrath's traumatic past and rise to power. At nine, Jorg witnessed the murder of his mother and brother, orchestrated by his uncle, while his abusive father, Olidan, ruled Ancrath. Jorg's life is

marked by violence, including his accidental killing of his stepbrother Degran, a memory later suppressed and recovered. His obsession with his step-aunt Katherine and his marriage to the young Queen Miana further complicate his tumultuous journey.

Jorg’s political and supernatural struggles are central to the narrative. After seizing his uncle’s throne in Renar, he faces the aftermath of a shattered army and a fractured empire ripe for conquest. Behind the scenes, magically gifted individuals manipulate events, while Jorg discovers the existence of "ghosts" of the Builders—ancient scientists who altered the world’s laws, enabling magic. From one such ghost, Fexler Brews, Jorg learns that his powers stem from these changes, though his necromancy and fire abilities were lost after a near-fatal battle. The Dead King, a mysterious figure from the deadlands, takes a keen interest in Jorg, with necromancer Chella acting as his agent.

The chapter also highlights the broader political landscape of the Broken Empire, where rulers convene every four years in Vyene for Congression to elect an emperor—a process unresolved for a century. Jorg’s strategic moves, including recovering his wounded chancellor Coddin and acquiring a Builder’s gun, underscore his ruthless pragmatism. Meanwhile, Katherine’s fate remains uncertain after her diary is found amidst destruction, adding emotional stakes to Jorg’s quest for power.

The recap concludes with events from four years earlier, where Jorg, at his grandfather’s castle, encounters the mathmagician Qalasadi and the ghost Fexler, who provides him with a view-ring offering satellite imagery. These elements set the stage for Jorg’s continued ambition and the looming conflict with supernatural and political forces. The summary effectively ties together past events while priming readers for the next phase of Jorg’s dark and complex saga.

Chapter 2: Prologue

The prologue introduces Kai, a sky-sworn individual with the ability to project his consciousness into the heavens, standing before an ancient monolith known as the old-stone. This sacred site, perched on a promontory called the Finger, is a place where the boundaries between worlds thin, allowing communion with celestial beings. Kai ascends into the sky, observing the landscape from above and encountering a seris, a mystical cloud-snake that embodies the collective knowledge of its kind. Their conversation reveals Kai’s deep longing for love, symbolized by the seris’s metaphor of "one shadow," while also hinting at an impending threat.

As Kai converses with the seris, the creature warns him of a rising storm—not of weather, but of supernatural danger, possibly the Lichkin or other malevolent forces. The seris’s cryptic message unsettles Kai, who abruptly returns to his physical body on the Finger. There, he reunites with Sula, a noblewoman with whom he shares a passionate connection. Despite their playful banter, Kai’s concern grows as he recalls the seris’s warning. Sula, initially dismissive, soon notices an eerie mist spreading across the Reed Sea, confirming Kai’s fears.

Kai urges Sula to flee with him to safety, but their escape is abruptly interrupted when mire ghouls attack. Sula is struck by poisoned darts, and Kai, though armed, succumbs to numbness as the toxins take effect. The ghouls swarm over the Finger, their silent and swift advance leaving Kai powerless. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with Kai’s fate uncertain and the threat of the ghouls looming large, underscoring the fragility of human life against the encroaching darkness.

The prologue sets a tone of mysticism and impending doom, blending themes of love, destiny, and supernatural peril. Kai’s abilities and his connection to the seris highlight the novel’s fantastical elements, while the sudden violence of the ghouls introduces a visceral threat. The juxtaposition of Kai’s celestial journey and the grounded danger on

the Finger creates tension, foreshadowing larger conflicts to come. The chapter effectively establishes the stakes and the world’s eerie, unpredictable nature.

Chapter 3

The chapter opens with King Jorg reflecting on his past failures, particularly the death of his brother, which haunts him like thorns embedded deep within. He describes how life has stripped away parts of him, leaving scars that define his existence. The arrival of the Gilden Guard on his birthday serves as a recurring reminder of his responsibilities and the weight of his crown. Jorg observes their disciplined ranks with a mix of admiration and detachment, noting their golden armor and the sheer force of their presence in his castle, the Haunt.

Jorg interacts with Captain Harran, who insists they must depart soon for the Congression in Vyene, despite Jorg’s reluctance to leave his birthday celebrations. The political undertones are clear as Jorg hints at the futility of the Congression, which has failed to elect an emperor for decades. His pregnant wife, Miana, accompanies him, and their banter reveals a relationship built on mutual understanding and sharp wit. She gifts him a rod of office, a symbol of his authority, which pleases him more than he openly admits.

The dynamics of Jorg’s court are further explored through his interactions with Makin and Miana. Makin, now Lord of Kennick, seems to prefer the Haunt over his own lands, while Miana’s youthful appearance belies her sharp mind and resilience. Jorg’s impending departure weighs on him, especially as Miana nears childbirth, but he masks his guilt with humor and practicality. The chapter highlights the tension between his duties as a king and his personal attachments, a theme underscored by his visit to the ailing Coddin.

Coddin, bedridden from a festering wound, chastises Jorg for not properly saying goodbye to Miana, emphasizing the emotional toll of his absence. Jorg’s reluctance to show vulnerability is evident, yet Coddin’s words resonate. The chapter closes with Jorg’s admiration for the Gilden Guard’s precision, a stark contrast to the chaos of his

own life. The rod of office becomes a metaphor for his burden—a weapon and a symbol, heavy with the weight of his past and the demands of his future.

Chapter 4

The chapter opens with Emperor Jorg and his Gilden Guard leaving the Matteracks, their gleaming armor soon dulled by dust as they descend to the plains. Riding alongside Makin, Jorg reflects on their past and present—Makin, once carefree on the road, now bears the weight of worry. Their conversation turns to Jorg's queen, whom he respects but does not love, revealing his emotional detachment. Makin probes Jorg's feelings about impending fatherhood, but Jorg remains uncertain, haunted by his own failures and the legacy of his father's cruelty. The dialogue underscores Jorg's internal conflict and Makin's role as a moral compass.

As the group approaches Hodd Town, Jorg opts to camp rather than enter the city, preferring the simplicity of the road to the discomforts of court life. Makin urges him to engage with his people, but Jorg dismisses the idea, revealing his disdain for ceremonial duties. The contrast between Jorg's restless nature and the obligations of rulership is palpable. Meanwhile, the camp bustles with activity, and Jorg observes the disciplined routines of his guard, a far cry from the chaotic freedom of his outlaw past. The scene highlights the tension between Jorg's warrior instincts and the demands of empire.

Jorg reflects on his time in Prince Orrin's grand palace, a place that felt hollow despite its splendor. He recalls preferring the brutality of battle to the stifling luxury of court, suggesting his discomfort with stability. The Haunt, his mountain stronghold, feels more like home, where the rugged terrain and loyal subjects align with his temperament. Jorg's musings reveal a man torn between the allure of power and the pull of his roots, wary of becoming soft or disconnected from the harsh realities that shaped him.

The chapter closes with Jorg settling by a campfire, rejecting the comforts of a tent as rain begins to fall. He finds solace in the familiar rhythms of camp life, a stark contrast

to the isolation of palaces. A guard captain interrupts to announce a priest’s arrival, hinting at unresolved tensions with the church. The scene encapsulates Jorg’s preference for the raw, unfiltered world of soldiers over the pomp of rulership, leaving the reader with a sense of his unyielding, if conflicted, nature.

Chapter 5

The chapter opens with a tense morning exchange between Jorg and Makin, marked by Jorg’s silence and Makin’s attempt to engage him over a past chess game. Jorg’s distracted demeanor is evident as he crunches stale bread and ignores Makin’s remarks about his chess skills. The atmosphere is charged with unspoken tension, underscored by Jorg’s abrupt request for Riccard, signaling his preoccupation with deeper concerns. Makin, perceptive as ever, complies without question, leaving to fetch Riccard while the scene sets the tone for Jorg’s brooding introspection.

Riccard arrives, muddy and disheveled, and Jorg issues precise instructions for him to ride to the Haunt and deliver a report. The specificity of Jorg’s orders—particularly the mention of a white-skinned man and the retrieval of a black coffer—hints at underlying urgency and mystery. Makin’s raised eyebrow suggests his curiosity, but he refrains from probing further, respecting Jorg’s authority. The exchange highlights Jorg’s strategic mind and the weight of his responsibilities, as well as the loyalty of his companions, who follow his commands without hesitation.

Jorg’s inner turmoil becomes clearer as he interacts with the chessboard, rolling the white queen and biting into an apple with palpable agitation. His thoughts reveal a conflict between dismissing a disturbing dream as false or accepting it as a true warning, though both scenarios leave him unsettled. The chess pieces and the fallen queen symbolize his frustration and the games he feels trapped in, both literal and metaphorical. The imagery of the apple’s juice on the board mirrors the messiness of his emotions and the unpredictability of his circumstances.

The chapter closes with Makin’s offer to play another game of chess, met with Jorg’s definitive refusal as he knocks over the queen and pawns. His declaration, “I’m past games,” signifies a turning point—a rejection of trivial pursuits and a focus on more pressing matters. The sounds of the camp being struck in the background reinforce the

theme of movement and change, suggesting Jorg is ready to leave behind distractions and confront whatever challenges lie ahead. The scene leaves readers with a sense of impending action and Jorg’s resolute determination.

Chapter 6

In Chapter 4 of *Emperor of Thorns*, the protagonist, Jorg, reflects on his early reign after claiming the Haunt and Highland’s crown at fourteen. Now fifteen, he stays at Castle Morrow under his grandfather’s protection, drawn not just by the promise of alliance but by the secrets hidden beneath the castle. In a forgotten cellar, he discovers a remnant of a lost world—a Builder’s artifact—and interacts with a mysterious entity named Fexler Brews. Using a view-ring, Jorg glimpses a vision of the world from space, spotting a red dot that seems to beckon him to a specific location, hinting at a hidden purpose or test.

Jorg’s curiosity drives him to investigate the red dot’s significance. He consults his grandfather’s map room, battling the wind and an anxious scribe to identify the location as the Iberico Hills, a region marked as a “promised land” tainted by the remnants of the Builders’ war. The scribe explains these are half-life lands, dangerous and uninhabitable due to lingering poisons. Despite the warnings, Jorg remains determined, sensing the red dot is a deliberate clue left by Fexler. The chapter underscores Jorg’s reckless ambition and his disregard for conventional wisdom, traits that define his character.

Seeking advice, Jorg confronts his uncle, Lord Robert, in the stables. Robert warns him of the Iberico’s lethal dangers—sickness, decay, and unnatural horrors—urging him to abandon his quest. Jorg acknowledges the risks but dismisses them, framing his recklessness as the impulsiveness of youth. He jokes about his arranged marriage to Miana, suggesting his potential demise would simply require finding her another husband. Robert’s concern is palpable, but Jorg’s resolve remains unshaken, highlighting his stubbornness and the tension between his ambitions and the counsel of those who care for him.

The chapter culminates in Jorg’s unwavering decision to venture into the Iberico, despite overwhelming evidence of its dangers. His interaction with Fexler’s view-ring and the cryptic red dot suggests a deeper, possibly supernatural, connection to the Builders’ legacy. Jorg’s defiance of reason and authority reinforces his character as a daring, almost self-destructive explorer, driven by an insatiable need to uncover secrets. The chapter sets the stage for a perilous journey, leaving readers to wonder whether Jorg’s boldness will lead to revelation or ruin.

Chapter 7

The chapter opens with a reflection on the strategic placement of castles like Morrow and the Haunt, designed for defense during the Hundred War. Conquests often target rulers to claim thrones intact, while wars of attrition—marked by destruction of land and peasantry—occur when forces are evenly matched. The narrative then shifts to Jorg and Sunny’s journey to Albaseat, a fertile city fed by the River Jucca. The lush surroundings contrast sharply with Jorg’s homeland, highlighting Albaseat’s prosperity and the Moors’ lasting influence on its architecture and wealth.

Upon arrival, Jorg marvels at Albaseat’s grandeur, which dwarfs his capital, Hodd Town. He ascends the Fayed Tower for a panoramic view, observing the city’s stark social divisions: wealthy mansions to the west and cramped alleys to the east. The vibrant life below stirs introspection, as Jorg contemplates his restless desire to seek deeper meaning beyond the surface of the world. His musings reveal a yearning for purpose, hinting at the existential drive that propels him toward dangerous, unknown paths.

Jorg’s visit to the Lord House underscores his royal status, though Sunny often forgets his title. The opulent reception chamber, adorned with intricate geometric tiles, impresses Jorg with its mathematical beauty. The provost, a shrewd elderly woman, formally welcomes him and proposes a banquet in his honor. Her mention of merchants, nobles, and Cardinal Hencom’s expectations underscores the political and social web Jorg navigates, even as he resists formalities and delays the scribe with his quick wit.

The chapter closes with Jorg’s characteristic defiance and impatience, as he dismisses the provost’s plans and leaves the scribe scrambling to record his words. His restless energy and disdain for pomp reflect his broader disdain for convention, reinforcing his role as a disruptive force in a world bound by tradition. The juxtaposition of Albaseat’s

splendor and Jorg’s inner turmoil sets the stage for his next unpredictable move.

Chapter 8

The chapter opens with the narrator and Sunny navigating the pre-dawn streets of Albaseat, a city sweltering under the summer heat. The bustling activity of merchants and laborers contrasts with the oppressive atmosphere, setting the stage for the grim encounter that follows. As they pass a smithy, they witness the blacksmith brutally beating his young apprentice, a fair-haired boy reminiscent of the narrator’s brother. The violence escalates, with the smith nearly killing the child, prompting Sunny to intervene reluctantly, while the narrator remains detached, reflecting on the harsh realities of life and his own ambitions.

The narrator’s internal conflict is highlighted as he grapples with his conscience, symbolized by a burning pain across his face. Despite his cynical view that suffering is commonplace, Sunny’s intervention forces him to act. The narrator negotiates with the smith, proposing a contest to buy the boy’s freedom. The smith, confident in his strength, agrees to a challenge involving lifting an anvil, but the narrator outwits him by striking him with a hammer instead, exploiting the lack of rules. The act is pragmatic yet ruthless, underscoring the narrator’s willingness to bend morality to achieve his ends.

After the confrontation, the narrator and Sunny leave the smith and the injured boy behind, the narrator justifying his indifference by claiming the boy would only be a burden. The scene shifts to the crowded plaza near the North Gate, where the chaos of commerce and daily life continues unabated. Sunny expresses doubt about finding their contact in the tumult, but the narrator remains confident, hinting at their next move. The contrast between the earlier brutality and the mundane hustle of the plaza emphasizes the world’s unforgiving nature.

The chapter delves into themes of power, morality, and survival, with the narrator’s actions reflecting his pragmatic and often merciless worldview. His reluctance to save

the boy underscores his belief that compassion is a weakness, a lesson learned through past hardships. The encounter with the smith serves as a microcosm of the broader struggles in the narrative, where strength and cunning prevail over empathy. The chapter leaves readers questioning the cost of ambition and the limits of humanity in a harsh, unforgiving world.

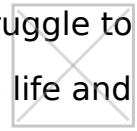
Chapter 9

The chapter opens with Chella, a necromancer, defeated and trapped in the Cantanlona Swamps, reflecting on her past and her connection to Kashta, a figure from her life who commands her to leave. Their tense exchange reveals Chella's brokenness and her refusal to be pitied, as well as her lingering anger and power struggles. The scene shifts to her physical struggle in the marsh, where her necromantic powers have been corrupted by natural life, leaving her weakened and in pain. Her desperation is palpable as she curses Jorg Ancrath, the one who has undone her work and forced her back into the realm of the living.

Chella's physical agony is compounded by emotional torment as a crow, channeling the voice of her deceased brother, taunts her with memories of her past. The crow's words highlight the irreversible consequences of choosing the necromantic path, a choice driven not by tragedy but by mundane greed and curiosity. Chella resists these memories, but they flood her mind, forcing her to confront the emptiness of her motivations. The crow's disappearance leaves her alone with her thoughts, emphasizing the isolation and regret that define her existence. Her brother's teachings, once a source of pride, now serve as a bitter reminder of her fallibility.

As night falls, Chella grapples with the physical and emotional aftermath of her failed necromancy. Her body, now vulnerable to leeches and mosquitoes, symbolizes her return to mortality and the fragility she once scorned. The marsh's stench and her own weakness amplify her fear, not of the natural world but of the Dead King, a terrifying figure who commands necromancers as servants rather than masters. Chella dreads facing him in her diminished state, realizing her power is now a tattered remnant of what it once was. This fear underscores the shift in her identity from master of death to its subordinate.

The chapter concludes with Chella's realization that the Dead King's influence extends far beyond her own cabal, affecting all who delve into necromancy. Her journey, once driven by selfish desires, has led her to a place of subjugation and dread. The chapter paints a vivid portrait of her downfall, blending physical decay with psychological unraveling. Chella's story serves as a cautionary tale about the costs of power and the inevitability of consequences, even for those who believe themselves beyond reproach. Her struggle to reconcile her past choices with her present reality leaves her trapped between life and death, a prisoner of her own making.



Chapter 10

The chapter opens with King Jorg reflecting on Hodd Town, a city he claims as his own despite its inferiority to other cities in his conquered territories. Unlike other places where the legacy of Prince Orrin of Arrow is revered, Hodd Town bears Jorg's mark, having been brutally reclaimed during a rebellion. The townspeople enthusiastically greet Jorg and his Gilden Guard, though their cheers are more a reaction to novelty than genuine loyalty. Jorg proceeds to Lord Holland's mansion, the grandest building in the city, where he is received with obsequious hospitality, though he remains dismissive of Holland's attempts to impress him.

Upon entering Holland's opulent guest chambers, Jorg and his companions—Makin and the formidable Gorgoth—remark on the excessive luxury. Jorg cynically observes that such decadence often comes at the expense of practical defenses. Gorgoth, a troll-like figure, is initially barred by Holland's guards but is allowed entry after Jorg asserts his status. The group discusses the absurdity of their surroundings, with Gorgoth noting the fragility of the ornate furnishings compared to the rugged beauty of his mountain home. Jorg dismisses them to amuse themselves while he retires to the lavish bed, hinting at deeper thoughts he needs to ponder.

Alone, Jorg reflects on his decision to bring Gorgoth to the upcoming Congression, recognizing the troll's value as an honest advisor who cannot be commanded. He muses on the rarity of such loyalty and the importance of having someone who will challenge him. To pass the time, Jorg plays chess, pondering the futility of the game in the face of the Builders' advanced technology, which could outplay any human. The chess pieces become a metaphor for his broader existential concerns about power, control, and the limits of human ingenuity.

The chapter closes with Jorg succumbing to sleep, where he is drawn into a dream of the Tall Castle and memories of his father's throne room. These visions, likely

influenced by Katherine, evoke past traumas, including the death of his brother Galen and his fraught relationship with his father. The dream sequence underscores Jorg’s internal struggles, suggesting that even as a ruthless king, he remains haunted by unresolved pain and the weight of his choices. The chapter blends action, introspection, and symbolism, revealing Jorg’s complex character and the tensions between his outward dominance and inner vulnerabilities.

Chapter 11

The chapter opens with Jorg, the protagonist, being abruptly awakened by Makin in Lord Holland’s house, where he is staying. Still groggy and irritated, Jorg learns that his wife, Miana, has arrived. He quickly prepares to meet her, skipping his usual shaving routine, and heads to the blue room where Miana is waiting. She is accompanied by Marten, who is visibly injured, and a group of guards protecting a black coffer. Jorg embraces Miana, relieved to see her unharmed after a disturbing dream involving an assassin targeting her.

Jorg reveals that he saw the assassin in a dream, a white man sent by the Vatican or disguised as such, and recounts how Miana and Marten killed him. He speculates that the assassin’s use of dream-magic left him vulnerable to Jorg’s own latent abilities, possibly inherited from Sageous, a figure he previously defeated. Marten presents evidence from the assassin: a scroll, gold coins, and a papal seal ring. The scroll is a warrant for Miana’s death, which Jorg interprets as the Vatican’s retaliation for his past actions, particularly the sack of St Sebastian’s and the maiming of Bishop Murillo Ap Belpan.

The group turns their attention to the black coffer, which contains a vast amount of gold—two years’ worth of taxes from seven nations. Jorg proposes using the gold to build a cathedral as an act of contrition, a move he believes will force the Pope to attend its consecration. Miana, skeptical but diplomatic, sees the strategic value in this plan, while Makin and Marten are initially confused but defer to Jorg’s judgment. Jorg hints at darker intentions, suggesting he might confront the Pope directly, but Miana warns him against reckless actions.

The chapter concludes with Jorg announcing that Miana will accompany him as his advisor, despite her pregnancy, traveling in a guard wagon with Marten. Miana is initially resistant but eventually agrees, and the group prepares to depart Lord

Holland’s mansion. The scene underscores Jorg’s cunning and the tension between his ruthless pragmatism and Miana’s more measured approach, setting the stage for their journey and the looming confrontation with the Vatican.

Chapter 12

The chapter opens with King Jorg and his entourage traveling through muddy terrain, accompanied by a large cavalry. The journey is made smoother by the army's horses churning the road ahead, though the carriage's exterior is caked in mud. Inside, the luxurious carriage contrasts with the discomfort of its occupants, including Bishop Gomst and Chamberlain Osser Gant, who share a cold. Jorg's wife, Miana, pregnant and unprepared for the trip, expresses frustration at the lack of proper midwives, prompting Jorg to promise finding suitable replacements in Teutonia. His restlessness is evident as he prefers the open road to the confined carriage.

Jorg reflects on the journey's route, which will take them through Gelleth and Attar, eventually reaching the River Danoob. The logistics of transporting horses and men complicate travel plans, as barges are impractical for their large party. Jorg's thoughts drift to his uneasy relationship with Miana, questioning whether any man truly enjoys prolonged time with his wife. His guilt over his reluctance to stay with her is tempered by his preference for action and the outdoors. A brief interaction with Miana highlights their emotional distance, leaving Jorg feeling inadequate as a husband and king.

Riding alongside the carriage, Jorg's mood darkens as rain falls. His companion, Makin, attempts lighthearted conversation, but Jorg responds with a grim analogy about autumn leaves representing death and poison. This leads Jorg to ponder whether aging men, like leaves, accumulate the world's evils before dying. His thoughts wander to memories of Elin, a woman from his past, contrasting with his lack of attention to Miana's eyes until now. The chapter underscores Jorg's introspective yet cynical worldview, blending nature's beauty with themes of mortality and regret.

The journey progresses as they cross into Attar, where the ruins of a fort serve as a reminder of past conflicts. Jorg notes the eerie presence of the Engine of Wrong in Nathal, which has rendered northern Attar a desolate wasteland. The chapter ends

with the group traversing Attar’s vineyards, hinting at the region’s contrasts between fertility and decay. Jorg’s observations reveal his keen awareness of the land’s history and his own place within it, blending practicality with philosophical musings.

Chapter 13

Chella, a necromancer serving the Dead King, reflects on five wasted years of obedience, marked by hardship and failure. Her resentment toward Jorg Ancrath simmers as she finally answers the Dead King’s summons, eager yet fearful of his judgment. The chapter opens with her bitterness and the inhumanity of the Dead King’s court, setting a dark tone for her journey. Her desperation to prove herself drives her actions, as she seeks redemption through a brutal interrogation of Kai, a captured wind-sworn soldier, whom she hopes to convert into an asset for the Dead King.

Chella’s interrogation of Kai is both psychological and physical, as she alternates between pain and persuasion to break his will. She stabs him with a needle, taunts him with the corpse of his companion Sula, and mocks his emotional attachments, insisting he embrace the harsh reality of their world. Her methods reveal her own cynicism and survival instincts, as she dismisses love and loyalty as illusions. Kai’s resistance begins to waver, hinting at his potential as a recruit, while Chella’s impatience and anxiety underscore her precarious position.

The chapter delves into the Dead King’s rise to power, transforming from a manipulative force to an unstoppable ruler who commands necromancers outright. Chella acknowledges his dominance, contrasting her own stagnation with his ascendance. She views Kai as her ticket to redemption, a rare talent whose skills could appease the Dead King. Their exchange reveals the Dead King’s expanding influence, as he seeks to recruit sworn warriors from all elements, blurring the line between life and death. Chella’s manipulation of Kai reflects her own submission to the Dead King’s will, as she grooms him for a darker path.

The chapter closes with Chella’s determination to present Kai as an offering to the Dead King, hoping to atone for her past failures. Her journey underscores themes of

power, survival, and the erosion of humanity in a world ruled by death. The Dead King’s court looms as a place of reckoning, where Chella’s fate hangs in the balance. Her actions with Kai reveal her ruthless pragmatism, as she navigates a world where loyalty is transactional and survival demands sacrifice. The chapter sets the stage for her confrontation with the Dead King, blending dread with grim resolve.

Chapter 14

The chapter opens with the protagonist and companions—Lesha and Sunny—arriving at Carrod Springs, a desolate settlement reeking of sulfur and chemical fumes. The town’s inhabitants endure harsh conditions, with salt crusting their homes and veils, hinting at a life shaped by necessity rather than choice. The group purchases salt pills from Toltech, a local expert, to protect against the lingering sickness caused by the "Builders’ fire." The pills, wrapped in greased paper, are essential for their journey into the toxic Iberico range, underscoring the perilous nature of their quest and the mysterious legacy of the Builders.

Toltech, a scarred and enigmatic figure, reveals fragments of the Builders’ artifacts—green glass bottles, fractured plasteek, and a massive silver cog—suggesting a lost, advanced civilization. When questioned about the Builders, Toltech cryptically states they are "not gone" and cannot be trusted, echoing local lore. The exchange hints at a deeper, unresolved threat tied to the Builders’ remnants, leaving the protagonist curious but unsatisfied. The group’s transaction with Toltech blends commerce and mystery, emphasizing the value of both survival tools and forgotten knowledge.

As the group camps near the Iberico range, the conversation turns to the Builders’ alleged influence on the world. Lesha describes them as spirits woven into nature, while the protagonist privately recalls encountering machine-like echoes of their technology. Sunny shares a chilling anecdote about a mage who sank into stone, illustrating the unpredictable dangers of the Builders’ lingering power. The eerie silence of the Iberico, devoid of even insects, heightens the sense of foreboding, reinforcing the idea that the land itself is tainted by the Builders’ legacy.

The chapter closes with the group on the brink of entering the lifeless Iberico, their resolve tested by the unknown. Lesha’s warning—"nothing lives in the Iberico"—serves

as a final reminder of the stakes. The protagonist’s unease and the cryptic references to the Builders create a tense atmosphere, setting the stage for a journey into a world where past and present dangers intertwine. The narrative balances physical hardship with existential dread, leaving readers anticipating the revelations to come.

Chapter 15

The chapter opens with Jorg and his companions, Lesha and Sunny, camped in an unnervingly silent night. Jorg's heightened senses detect approaching danger, but Lesha and Sunny, accustomed to safety, react sluggishly. When attackers—later identified as the Perros Viciosos bandits—close in, Jorg urges them to flee. The group runs blindly through the dark, with Jorg relying on memory of the terrain to navigate. Despite their efforts, they are pursued relentlessly, their pursuers whooping and howling as if hunting prey. The tension escalates as Jorg realizes they may be deliberately herded into a trap.

As the group races through a valley, Sunny suddenly falls into a concealed pit, followed by Jorg and Lesha. The pit, lined with charred remains, reveals its grim purpose: the bandits use it to burn captives. Lesha, paralyzed by fear, reveals the bandits' reputation for brutality. Sunny suggests negotiating a ransom, but Jorg dismisses the idea, knowing the bandits won't believe his royal status. With no weapons and limited options, Jorg devises a ruthless plan to turn the pit's design against their captors.

In a shocking move, Jorg beheads Lesha and hurls her head at a bandit peering into the pit, disorienting him and seizing his torch. He explains to a horrified Sunny that the pit's flammable brush and their captors' tactics necessitate extreme measures. Using the bandit's blood to dampen the brush, they secure thrown torches and prevent the pit from igniting. Jorg's cold calculation underscores his survival instincts, prioritizing pragmatism over mercy.

The chapter concludes with Jorg and Sunny preparing for a desperate stand. Jorg justifies his actions to Sunny, stating Lesha's death spared her prolonged torture and provided a tactical advantage. His brutal efficiency highlights the harsh realities of their world, where survival often demands morally ambiguous choices. The scene

leaves the reader anticipating the next clash, as the bandits regroup and the trapped duo faces overwhelming odds.

Chapter 16

The chapter opens with a grim scene where an old woman tortures a man named Sunny, exposing his ribs while a girl named Gretcha presents a strange, oversized scorpion to the narrator. The scorpion emits mechanical sounds, hinting at an unnatural origin, and its eyes briefly flash crimson. Amid Sunny’s screams, the narrator observes the crowd of onlookers, the Bad Dogs, who watch the torture with casual cruelty. The atmosphere is one of brutality and detachment, as the narrator reflects on the inevitability of suffering and the dehumanizing nature of torture.

As the old woman meticulously carves into Sunny’s body, the narrator grapples with fear and despair, attempting to distance himself mentally from the horror. Gretcha continues her violent pursuit of the scorpion, eventually crushing it, while the narrator notices eerie visions in the fire, possibly hallucinations from terror. Sunny’s agony escalates as Gretcha brands him with a hot iron, shattering his teeth and searing his mouth. The narrator, bound and helpless, weeps not for Sunny but out of fear for his own impending torture, realizing the selfish nature of survival in extreme suffering.

The Bad Dogs revel in the spectacle, cheering as Gretcha blinds Sunny with the iron. The narrator’s anger flares, directed at both his captors and the futility of his situation. He recalls a moment with the Nuban, a figure from his past who embraced danger, and yearns for a similar chance to fight back. However, Gretcha hesitates under his intense gaze, and Rael intervenes, securing the narrator’s head before taking the iron himself. The narrator memorizes Rael’s face, determined to remember his tormentor.

Rael taunts the narrator, suggesting his noble status due to the gold and a watch he carries. The chapter ends with tension unresolved, as Rael prepares to brand the narrator, leaving his fate uncertain. The scene underscores themes of powerlessness, brutality, and the psychological toll of torture, blending visceral horror with the narrator’s internal struggle against despair. The mechanical scorpion and eerie visions

hint at deeper, possibly supernatural, elements lurking beneath the surface of the narrative.

Chapter 17

In Chapter 15, "Chella’s Story," the necromancer Chella interrogates Kai Summerson, a captive chained in a dungeon surrounded by the undead. Despite his dire situation, Kai remains defiant, questioning Chella’s motives and actions. Chella, unsettled by his resilience, paces restlessly, revealing her frustration and the unusual dynamic between them. Kai’s sharp retorts, such as referencing her use of his deceased lover Sula’s corpse, highlight his awareness of her desperation, suggesting he understands her need for his cooperation to achieve her goals.

Chella’s desperation stems from her desire to escape the Dead King’s disdain, and she leans in close, wielding an iron needle, though the power balance has shifted. Kai’s probing questions about the nature of resurrection—specifically how Sula’s soul could be in heaven yet her body reanimated—expose his skepticism. Chella explains that only fragments of a person’s essence are needed to reanimate a corpse, emphasizing traits like greed or anger. However, she avoids mentioning that some, like saints or children, might pass on entirely, hinting at her manipulative tactics.

Kai challenges Chella’s moral stance, questioning why he should damn himself to eternal torment to avoid a painful death. His lack of fear unnerves her, as she realizes he perceives the situation as surreal. Chella reflects that time and isolation would break him, but she lacks the luxury of waiting. Instead, she shifts her argument, painting a apocalyptic vision where death is broken, hell is rising, and heaven’s protection is fleeting. She insists the Dead King’s reign will reshape eternity, forcing Kai to choose between joining the fire or becoming its fuel.

The chapter culminates in a tense ideological clash. Chella’s pragmatic, survivalist worldview contrasts with Kai’s moral resistance, underscoring the chapter’s themes of power, manipulation, and existential dread. Her ultimatum—submit or perish—reveals the stakes of their conflict, while Kai’s defiance suggests a deeper struggle between

hope and despair. The dialogue-driven narrative immerses readers in a dark, morally ambiguous world where the lines between life, death, and salvation blur.

Chapter 18

The chapter opens with Jorg learning that his father, Olidan Ancrath, is traveling ahead of his own column. Despite his bravado, Jorg feels a deep-seated fear of his father, a sentiment echoed by his companion Makin, who describes Olidan's unnerving presence and cold demeanor. Though Olidan is less overtly cruel than other rulers, his mere gaze instills dread. Jorg, usually bold, hesitates to confront him, weighed down by old scars and unresolved pain. The oppressive atmosphere—grey skies and a chilling wind—mirrors his internal turmoil as he reflects on his fraught relationship with his father.

Makin shares a poignant story about the death of his young daughter, Cerys, during a petty conflict between neighboring lords. His grief and subsequent quest for vengeance reveal the lasting impact of loss and how it shapes a person. Makin's journey from a grieving father to a hardened warrior underscores the chapter's theme of how suffering transforms individuals. Jorg's attempt to connect with Makin's pain highlights his own complex emotions, though he struggles to fully empathize, revealing his emotional detachment and latent violence.

As the column marches through Attar's heartlands, peasants pause their harvest rituals to witness the procession, drawn by the symbolism of empire and the promise of a better past. The scene contrasts the grandeur of power with the simplicity of rural life. Later, Jorg's wife, Miana, joins him briefly on horseback, her pregnancy adding tension to their journey. Marten, a loyal servant, expresses concern for her well-being, prompting Jorg to reluctantly acknowledge his responsibilities as a husband and soon-to-be father, though his thoughts linger on darker impulses.

The chapter closes with Jorg reentering the carriage, where he informs Miana about his father's proximity. Their conversation is strained, observed by companions Gomst and Osser, who tactfully avoid intruding. Jorg's discomfort with familial ties and his

unresolved anger toward Olidan simmer beneath the surface, hinting at future confrontations. The chapter masterfully intertwines personal grief, power dynamics, and the weight of legacy, painting a vivid portrait of Jorg’s internal and external conflicts.

Chapter 19

The chapter opens with Jorg encountering Katherine Ap Scorron, a striking and formidable woman dressed in mourning black, at the edge of winter. She has been sent by Jorg's father, King Olidan, to represent Ancrath at Congression, a move that hints at her growing influence in the court. Their tense exchange reveals unresolved grief and guilt, particularly over the death of Katherine's husband, Orrin, and Jorg's brother, Degran. Katherine's sharp demeanor and Jorg's restrained responses underscore their complicated history and mutual distrust.

Jorg invites Katherine to join him in the Renar carriage, where she meets his young wife, Queen Miana. The interaction between the two women is charged, with Miana's bluntness and Katherine's guardedness creating a palpable tension. Miana's pregnancy and her pointed remarks about firstborn children add a layer of irony, as Jorg reflects on his own family dynamics. The conversation shifts to Jorg's deceased younger brother, William, whom Bishop Gomst describes as a child of extraordinary will and potential, further highlighting Jorg's unresolved guilt and sense of inadequacy.

The discussion turns to King Olidan, with Katherine admitting that even after years at his court, he remains an enigma. This revelation suggests that Olidan's motives and dreams for Ancrath are deeply concealed, possibly even from those closest to him. Jorg interprets Katherine's words as confirmation that his father's actions—including the betrayal that nearly killed Jorg—were entirely his own, untouched by external manipulation. The exchange leaves Jorg grappling with the possibility that his father's hatred for him is rooted in something as simple as perceived weakness.

The chapter concludes with Osser Gant inquiring about the war in Ancrath, which Katherine describes as a grueling conflict against the undead. The attacks, she explains, are draining the kingdom's resources and morale, with rumors of a lichkin adding to the terror. Her report paints a bleak picture of Ancrath's struggles, further

complicating Jorg’s feelings about his homeland and his father’s rule. The chapter ends on a somber note, with the weight of past and present conflicts pressing heavily on Jorg.

Chapter 20

In Chapter 18, "Chella’s Story," Chella prepares Kai, a young novice necromancer, for an encounter with the Dead King’s court. She warns him to steel his mind and swear any oath demanded of him, emphasizing the gravity of the situation. Despite Kai’s visible fear and weariness, Chella recognizes a latent hardness within him, essential for necromancy. As they walk through the castle corridors, she instructs him to avoid looking at the lichkin, mysterious and terrifying entities that defy conventional understanding of death. Kai’s mix of fear and ambition surfaces, revealing his naivety about the true nature of the Dead King’s power.

Chella explains the distinction between the undead raised by necromancers and the lichkin, which are inherently dead but never lived. These creatures, born from the deadlands, serve the Dead King, who emerged from obscurity to claim his throne. The castle, recently seized from Lord Artur Elgin, is now guarded by reanimated corpses, preserved with chemicals to retain their cunning and strength. Chella notes the Dead King’s pervasive presence, a constant, oppressive force that permeates the castle, bitter and unnerving. The chapter underscores the hierarchy of power in this dark world, where even skilled necromancers like Chella are subordinate to the Dead King.

As they approach the court, the atmosphere grows more ominous. Giant, reanimated freaks and mire-ghouls stand guard, their grotesque forms a testament to the Dead King’s dominion. Chella feels the Dead King’s overwhelming presence, a corrupting force that once drew her in but now feels like a threat. The lichkin’s stench and the ghosts’ eerie glow heighten the tension. Kai, terrified, hesitates, but Chella commands him to stay, knowing escape is impossible. The court’s darkness is pierced by the spectral light of tormented spirits, revealing the lichkin as distortions in reality, their true forms horrifying and alien.

The chapter culminates in the Dead King’s reveal, seated on Artur Elgin’s throne, wearing his robes and body like ill-fitting garments. His smile, crafted from a dead man’s lips, is a grotesque mockery of humanity. Chella’s trembling hands and Kai’s fear underscore the Dead King’s terrifying authority. The scene encapsulates the chapter’s themes of power, corruption, and the unnatural, leaving a chilling impression of a world where death is not an end but a twisted beginning.

Chapter 21

The chapter opens with the protagonist dissecting a mechanical scorpion, revealing its intricate yet enigmatic design of black crystal, wires, and jelly-like substances. Despite its craftsmanship, he deems it broken and stows it away. The narrative then shifts to the grim task of burying two companions, Greyson and Lesha, with the protagonist reflecting on the brutality of death and the futility of words to capture its weight. His physical wounds mirror his emotional turmoil as he labors under the scorching sun, grappling with the stark reality of mortality and the desolation of the battlefield.

As night falls, the protagonist notices the eerie presence of the Dead King, symbolized by the lifeless eyes of corpses seemingly tracking his movements. A cold numbness, reminiscent of necromantic energy, grips him, heightening the tension. He dismembers the bodies of fallen enemies to prevent potential reanimation, a grueling task that leaves him exhausted. His dialogue with Rael’s corpse underscores his unease with the Dead King’s influence, hinting at a larger, unsettling power dynamic at play. The scene underscores the protagonist’s isolation and the ever-present threat of supernatural forces in his world.

The following dawn brings a return to the battlefield, now eerily devoid of scavengers due to the Iberico’s toxic environment. The protagonist gathers his belongings and departs, guided by Lesha’s horse, though he remains wary of invisible dangers lurking in the landscape. His journey takes a surreal turn when he discovers a heat haze revealing hidden Builder-stone structures, visible only through a view-ring. This device unveils a spectral world of crimson and orange hues, hinting at latent dangers or ancient technologies buried in the terrain. The protagonist’s curiosity and caution are palpable as he navigates this unseen threat.

The chapter culminates in a startling encounter with Fexler Brews, a spectral figure who materializes through the view-ring. Their interaction is charged with tension and

mystery, as the protagonist questions his purpose in this desolate land. Fexler’s appearance, tied to the ring’s magic, suggests deeper layers of the world’s lore and the protagonist’s connection to it. The chapter closes on an ambiguous note, leaving the protagonist—and the reader—pondering the significance of these visions and the unseen forces shaping his journey.

Chapter 22

The chapter follows the protagonist as he is led through the desolate Iberico Hills by the ghostly figure of Fexler Brews. The landscape is strewn with ancient, rusting remnants of Builder technology, some emitting strange sounds or displaying inexplicable functions. Despite the eerie surroundings, Fexler remains silent, guiding the protagonist through the harsh terrain until they reach a dead end. There, Fexler abruptly vanishes, leaving the protagonist to discover a hidden circular lid made of Builder-stone, which he laboriously uncovers to reveal a deep, smooth shaft descending into darkness.

Curious but cautious, the protagonist tests the shaft’s depth by dropping a rock and estimates it to be around forty feet. Despite concerns about infection from his wounds and the risk of getting trapped, he decides to descend using a makeshift rope. The climb is grueling, and his feverish state adds to the difficulty. As he lowers himself into the shaft, he braces against the walls, fearing the lid might seal him in. The descent leaves him battered, and he eventually drops the remaining distance, landing painfully in a dust-covered tunnel.

In the dim light, the protagonist assesses his injuries, including a piece of lantern glass embedded in his thigh. After lighting a lantern, he examines the tunnel, which resembles a sewer, and realizes the impossibility of climbing back up without assistance. The rope dangles far above, and his physical condition makes escape unlikely. The chapter ends with him contemplating his next move, resigned to exploring the tunnel despite the dangers.

The excerpt blends physical struggle with eerie, post-apocalyptic imagery, emphasizing the protagonist’s isolation and resilience. The mysterious Builder artifacts and Fexler’s cryptic guidance create a sense of unresolved tension, while the protagonist’s injuries and fever add a layer of vulnerability. The chapter sets the stage

for further exploration of the underground tunnel, leaving the reader anticipating what lies ahead in the darkness.

Chapter 23

In Chapter 21 of *Emperor of Thorns*, the protagonist, feverish and wounded, engages in a haunting conversation with Fexler, a ghostly remnant of the Builders. Set five years earlier in the ruins of Iberico, the dialogue reveals Fexler’s faction’s preference for Orrin of Arrow, a peacemaker projected to rule the empire. The protagonist, skeptical and weakened, questions Fexler’s motives, even as he deals with the unsettling presence of the Dead King, who manifests through corpses. The tension between survival and Fexler’s cryptic agenda sets the tone for the chapter.

Fexler unveils a deeper conflict rooted in the Builders’ legacy: a "wheel" they set in motion, altering the fabric of reality by empowering human will to shape the world. This manipulation has led to thinning barriers between life and death, energy and matter, giving rise to magic-like abilities. However, the unchecked use of these powers accelerates the world’s decay. The Dead King is presented as a symptom of this unraveling, a force of will exacerbating the crisis. The protagonist’s physical suffering mirrors the world’s deterioration, emphasizing the stakes.

Fexler explains that the Builders’ "ghosts" are divided: some seek to preserve humanity to maintain their networks, while others advocate for humanity’s eradication to halt the wheel’s destructive turn. The protagonist mocks the latter, highlighting the irony of the Builders’ unfinished destruction. Fexler, however, hints at a third path, distinct from subjugation or annihilation. Before he can elaborate, his presence flickers, and he urgently instructs the protagonist to take a control ring to Vyene, beneath the throne, suggesting a pivotal but unfinished plan.

The chapter ends abruptly as Fexler vanishes mid-sentence, leaving the protagonist with cryptic instructions and the yellow pills to treat his sepsis. The exchange underscores themes of legacy, unintended consequences, and the precarious balance between control and chaos. Fexler’s disappearance amplifies the mystery, setting the

stage for the protagonist’s next steps in a world teetering on the brink of collapse.

Chapter 24

The chapter opens with Chella, a necromancer, standing before the unsettling presence of the Dead King, Artur Elgin, whose grotesque mannerisms unsettle her. She introduces Kai Summerson, another necromancer seeking service, but the Dead King fixates on her past failure to recruit Jorg of Ancrath. Despite Chella's dismissive view of Jorg as merely lucky, the Dead King insists on bringing him to court, though his motives remain unclear. The tension is palpable as Chella navigates the Dead King's unnerving scrutiny, revealing her discomfort with his authority and the lingering shame of her earlier mission.

The Dead King shifts his attention to Kai, probing his past as a sky-sworn necromancer who feared losing himself to the winds. Through their exchange, the Dead King emphasizes the power of will and conviction, suggesting that fear is the true barrier to mastery. Kai's admission of fear contrasts with the Dead King's belief in self-command, which he claims anchors necromancers to their flesh and even binds the dead to the world. The interaction underscores the Dead King's manipulative prowess, as he exploits Kai's regrets and hints at a darker purpose for him, commanding him to embrace death on wings.

Chella remains alone with the Dead King, who reveals his ambition to rule beyond his current dominion, aspiring to remake the empire as a stepping stone to greater power. He questions why the Hundred have not united against him, concluding it's due to their lack of fear. The Dead King outlines the tactical advantages of his undead legions—their ability to thrive without breath or food—but admits these alone are insufficient for his grand designs. His childlike greed and pride emerge as he hints at new strategies, positioning Chella as a key instrument in his plans.

The chapter concludes with the Dead King assigning Chella a mysterious mission, accompanied by two lichkin, Thantos and Keres, and an unnamed escort. His cryptic

instructions suggest she will serve as a weapon to destabilize the empire, though the specifics remain shrouded in menace. The Dead King’s chilling authority and Chella’s reluctant obedience highlight the chapter’s themes of power, fear, and ambition, setting the stage for a darker conflict to come.

Chapter 25

The chapter opens with Jorg and his companions traveling toward Vyene, making slow but steady progress. Nights are spent either in commandeered lodgings or tents in the wilderness, with Jorg preferring the latter for the camaraderie and simplicity. Around the fire, tensions simmer between Jorg, his wife Miana, and Katherine, a woman from his past. Miana provocatively reveals Jorg’s troubled sleep in the Haunt, where he called out Katherine’s name, hinting at unresolved guilt or longing. Katherine responds with veiled threats, referencing Jorg’s crimes against her family, while the group remains silent, leaving Jorg to defend himself with grim acceptance.

As the journey continues, heavy rain transforms the roads into muddy rivers, forcing detours through towns with sturdy bridges. Jorg, seeking respite from Katherine’s cold presence, rides ahead on his horse. The weather clears briefly, revealing a surreal landscape of flooded fields mirroring the sky. Jorg’s introspection is interrupted when the group discovers unsettling signs—clothes tangled in fences and human teeth in the mud—suggesting a gruesome event. Captain Harran and Bishop Gomst are summoned, their unease hinting at supernatural danger lurking nearby.

Gomst identifies the disturbing findings as the work of the Dead King, possibly ghouls or worse, a lichkin—a terrifying entity from the Isles. His fear is palpable as he recounts prophecies of these creatures crossing into their world. The group’s mood darkens, with Harran confirming the grim legends. The setting sun casts an eerie red glow over the flooded land, amplifying the sense of impending doom. The chapter’s tone shifts from interpersonal tension to a foreboding confrontation with an ancient evil.

The chapter closes with Gomst’s dire warnings and the group’s growing dread. Katherine’s presence adds to the tension, as her history with Jorg and her sharp retorts underscore the personal stakes. The discovery of the teeth and rags serves as a grim

prelude to the horrors they may face in Gottering. The narrative balances intimate character dynamics with the looming supernatural threat, setting the stage for a perilous encounter. Jorg’s resigned defiance and the group’s silent apprehension reflect the gravity of their situation, leaving readers anticipating the next chapter’s dark turn.

Chapter 26

The chapter opens with Jorg and his company arriving in Gottering, a seemingly peaceful town in Attar, only to discover signs of a horrific massacre. The air carries the stench of blood and decay, and the guards soon uncover piles of flayed human skins hidden throughout the town. Jorg examines one of the skins, noting the precision of the flaying, and warns his men that their enemy uses terror as a weapon. The grim discovery sets a foreboding tone, hinting at the presence of a ruthless and skilled adversary.

As the guards gather the victims' skins in the town square, Jorg and his companions survey the empty streets, finding no immediate threats. Meanwhile, Miana, heavily pregnant, is escorted to the Red Fox Inn, where she appears to be going into labor. Jorg’s unease grows, both from the gruesome scene and the impending birth. Harran initially suggests leaving the town behind, but Jorg reminds him of their duty to protect others who may follow, forcing Harran to order a thorough search and securing of the area.

Jorg converses with Osser Gant about the lichkin, mysterious and deadly creatures that have recently emerged in the Ken Marshes. Osser reveals that there may be seven lichkin in existence, their names recorded by the blinded sisters of the Helskian Order. The discussion underscores the supernatural threat looming over the group, compounded by the eerie silence of the town and the unsettling pile of skins. Jorg’s tension is palpable as he balances the immediate danger with the personal stakes of Miana’s labor.

The chapter closes with Rike returning with loot, drawing Jorg’s amused yet critical attention. Meanwhile, Marten and Katherine attend to Miana inside the inn, while Jorg hesitates to enter, grappling with his fear. The juxtaposition of the grotesque discoveries outside and the intimate, vulnerable moment inside highlights the

chapter’s themes of terror, duty, and the weight of leadership. Jorg’s internal conflict and the unresolved threat of the lichkin leave the reader anticipating further confrontation.

Chapter 27

The chapter opens with Jorg and his companions wading through icy, foul-smelling floodwaters toward a copse of trees, their progress marked by discomfort and dark humor. Jorg reflects on childhood memories of swimming in the River Sane, contrasting the innocence of the past with the grim present. Rike, ever defiant, questions their mission, prompting Jorg to assert his authority with a veiled threat, revealing the tension between his kingship and the loyalty of his men. The group presses on, their resolve tested by the cold and the ominous atmosphere, as Jorg notes the predictability of defiance and the need to adapt his strategies.

As they near the trees, the environment grows more hostile, with mist, ice, and ghostly apparitions heightening the sense of dread. Jorg glimpses a spectral child and encounters an iron cross pendant, symbols of death and religion intertwined. He defiantly challenges the unseen forces, claiming familiarity with loss and horror. The tension escalates when his father, the iron-crowned king, appears—seemingly alive—and taunts Jorg with revelations about his impending fatherhood and his own death. The confrontation is charged with unresolved hatred, as Jorg struggles to reconcile his father’s presence with the impossibility of his survival.

The floodwaters rise ominously, mirroring Jorg’s weakening state as an old wound reopens, draining his strength. His father’s cruel words cut deep, dismissing Jorg as unworthy and weak, while revealing his knowledge of an assassination plot against Miana. The water engulfs Jorg, symbolizing his descent into helplessness and despair. As he sinks, his thoughts turn to his unborn child and wife, sparking a final surge of anger. The physical drowning parallels his emotional turmoil, as he curses his father for denying him the vengeance he craved.

In the chapter’s closing moments, Jorg’s submerged perspective shifts to a vision of Miana in childbirth, viewed through a green-tinged haze. The lichkin’s approach signals

impending danger, leaving the scene ominously unresolved. The chapter masterfully blends physical struggle with psychological torment, highlighting Jorg’s vulnerabilities and the haunting legacy of his father. The interplay of past and present, reality and illusion, creates a gripping narrative of survival, legacy, and unresolved conflict.

Chapter 28

Chella, a once-powerful necromancer now weakened after being drained by the Ancrath boy, travels in a carriage with Kai, a younger necromancer whose confidence and ease with dark magic irritate her. The cold autumn weather exacerbates her discomfort, and she reflects bitterly on her diminished state, contrasting it with Kai's untroubled demeanor. Chella resents Kai's ability to treat necromancy as a casual skill, while she has paid a heavy price for her power. Her frustration grows as she endures the physical pains of being alive, a stark reminder of her fall from grace.

Kai's nonchalant attitude and his proficiency in necromancy gnaw at Chella, who sees his lack of suffering as an affront. She recalls how he was once terrified when she first encountered him, but now his smugness and charm only deepen her disdain. Chella muses that true necromancy must exact a toll, yet Kai seems untouched by its horrors. Her bitterness is compounded by her own losses, including her power and the life she once knew. The chapter highlights her internal struggle as she grapples with envy, regret, and a longing for the darkness she once commanded.

The carriage halts near a town where smoke rises, prompting suspicion. Axtis, a guard, reports the anomaly, but Chella dismisses the concern, urging them to press on. Kai uses his wind-sight to observe a pyre in the town square, noting its lack of bones—a detail that unsettles Chella. She senses something hidden, a presence of agony or death, and prepares to use her remaining power to uncover it. The tension between the two necromancers simmers as they approach the mystery, with Chella determined to prove her superiority despite her weakened state.

A flashback reveals Chella's childhood memory of losing a stolen brooch in a cesspit, symbolizing her early encounters with desperation and moral ambiguity. This memory mirrors her current struggle—reaching into darkness to reclaim what she's lost. The chapter ends with her and Kai preparing to confront the unseen horror, their dynamic

fraught with rivalry and unspoken threats. Chella’s resentment and Kai’s arrogance set the stage for a clash, both with the lurking danger and each other.

Chapter 29

The chapter opens with Jorg, the protagonist, delirious and feverish in a dark, confined space beside the corpse of Fexler, a long-dead man. Clutching Fexler's gun and a mysterious thorn-patterned box, Jorg battles hallucinations of his past victims and loved ones, including Lesha and William. The dead of Gelleth and his brothers from the mire haunt him, their presence a grim reminder of his failures. Eventually, Fexler's medicines take effect, breaking the fever and leaving Jorg weak but alive, with William's accusatory eyes lingering in his mind as the last vestige of his delirium.

After recovering, Jorg scavenges supplies from Fexler's body in the darkness, finding tools and artifacts of the Builders, an ancient advanced civilization. He struggles to escape the shaft, enduring a grueling climb that nearly kills him. Emerging into the harsh sunlight, he finds his horses, Balky and the stallion, dehydrated but waiting. The encounter leaves him pondering the nature of Builder-ghosts and their alien existence. With limited water, Jorg presses on to the Bad Dogs' camp, where he refills his supplies and uses a view-ring to spot a mysterious red dot on a distant coast—a sign he reluctantly acknowledges as a destination he must pursue.

Jorg returns to the provost, the ruler of the city, to deliver the grim news of her granddaughter Lesha's death at the hands of outlaws. The provost, though hardened by years of rule, is visibly aged by the loss, reflecting on her many grandchildren and the fleeting connections of family. Jorg offers condolences, acknowledging Lesha's bravery and his own rare bond with her and Greyson, another fallen companion. The provost's sorrow is tinged with resignation, recognizing the harsh realities of their world, where survival often comes at a steep cost.

The chapter closes with Jorg carrying the weight of his discoveries—Fexler's gun and the enigmatic copper box—as well as the emotional burden of loss. The provost's hope that his findings were worth the sacrifice hangs in the air, unanswered. Jorg's journey

is far from over, marked by both physical relics of the Builders and the ghosts of his past, driving him toward an uncertain future. The red dot on the coast looms as a new destination, hinting at further trials and revelations ahead.

Chapter 30

The chapter opens with the protagonist, Jorg, reflecting on his journey to Afrique at the age of fifteen. Contrary to his expectations of a perilous sea voyage, the trip is relatively short, beginning from Albaseat and passing through well-traveled roads and ports. The proximity of Afrique to the Horse Coast is emphasized, yet its vastness and mystery remain undeniable. Jorg's brief time at sea, marked by his fifteenth birthday, serves as a transition into a world far removed from his familiar surroundings, setting the stage for his exploration of foreign lands and cultures.

Upon arriving at Port Albus, Jorg encounters a bustling, diverse environment filled with merchants, sailors, and exotic goods. He negotiates passage aboard the Keshaf, captained by Akham, and indulges in unfamiliar fruits, savoring the novelty of the experience. His curiosity and adaptability are evident as he interacts with the locals and absorbs the vibrant atmosphere. The introduction of a Florentine banker, Marco Onstantos Evenaline, adds a layer of tension; Jorg's brash demeanor contrasts sharply with Marco's reserved, almost disdainful attitude, hinting at the cultural clashes that may arise during their journey.

As the voyage progresses, Jorg finds solace in anonymity, shedding the burdens of his royal title. He reflects on his relentless pursuit of power, symbolized by the thorn-patterned copper box he carries—a reminder of his past crimes and the inescapable weight of his actions. The sea provides temporary respite, but Jorg acknowledges that his past will eventually catch up with him. His musings reveal a complex character, torn between the desire for freedom and the drive toward an imperial throne, a goal he views as both distant and necessary to justify his relentless ambition.

The chapter concludes with Jorg's encounter with Yusuf Malendra, another passenger who emerges from seclusion to share a moment of awe at the sight of Tariq's Mountain. Their conversation touches on the ancient history of the Builders and the

fragility of human knowledge, adding depth to the world-building. Yusuf’s cryptic remarks about lost civilizations and forgotten names underscore the chapter’s themes of exploration, mystery, and the fleeting nature of power, leaving readers with a sense of the vast, untapped history that lies ahead for Jorg in Afrique.

Chapter 31

The chapter opens with the protagonist engaging in a strategic board game called the game of twelve lines with Yusuf, a mathmagician whose analytical prowess unsettles him. As they play, the protagonist becomes increasingly aware that Yusuf and his associates may have predicted his every move, leaving him feeling trapped in a web of calculated probabilities. The tension escalates as he contemplates whether his actions—even drawing his dagger—are already anticipated, adding a layer of psychological intensity to the encounter.

Amid the game, the protagonist considers six possible courses of action, each reflecting the traits of different characters he knows, ranging from brute force to diplomacy. He decides to let chance guide him by rolling dice to select an option, hoping to disrupt the predictability of his behavior. The dice land on a diplomatic approach, frustrating him as he struggles to feign friendship with Yusuf. This moment highlights his internal conflict between his natural instincts and the need to outmaneuver his adversaries.

The scene shifts when the protagonist notices a commotion outside: a banker named Marco, besieged by children, struggling with his belongings. Seizing an opportunity to break free from Yusuf’s scrutiny, he intervenes, scattering the children and offering assistance. His attempt to charm Marco is awkward, revealing his discomfort with deception, yet he persists, hoping to forge an alliance or at least gain an advantage. The interaction underscores his adaptability and resourcefulness in unpredictable situations.

The chapter closes with the protagonist and Marco exchanging wary pleasantries, their mutual distrust palpable. Despite his reluctance, the protagonist commits to playing the role of a helpful friend, though his true intentions remain ambiguous. This encounter sets the stage for further intrigue, as the protagonist navigates a world

where every move seems calculated, and trust is a dangerous gamble.

Chapter 32

The chapter opens with Jorg and Marco arriving in the port city of Kutta, where Jorg, clad in his breastplate, mocks Marco’s discomfort in his formal attire. Marco, a banker, enjoys protections under clan privileges, though Jorg questions their efficacy in the fractured empire. As they navigate the narrow, shaded streets in search of transport, Jorg reflects on the precarious safety offered by banking traditions, noting that immediate greed often outweighs the threat of future retribution in lawless lands. Their search leads them to a dilapidated stable with camels, where Jorg attempts to barter for horses but is refused, hinting at unseen forces working against them.

Jorg realizes their journey to Hamada is being thwarted, likely by Ibn Fayed or his allies, and that his plans have been anticipated by mathmagicians. Despite the logical choice to abandon the mission, Jorg resists predictability, fearing it would play into his enemies’ hands. Marco, seemingly friendless and uncooperative, adds to the tension, his disdain for Jorg evident. The pair’s dynamic is strained, with Jorg shouldering the physical burden of Marco’s trunk while Marco remains aloof, his banker’s pride clashing with Jorg’s pragmatic ruthlessness.

After securing rooms in a surprisingly elegant guesthouse, Jorg collapses from exhaustion, reflecting on his journey across the empire. For the first time, he feels a longing for his Highland kingdom, a rare moment of vulnerability. Meanwhile, Marco’s peculiar demeanor stirs Jorg’s necromantic instincts, adding an eerie undercurrent to their interactions. The chapter closes with Jorg listing the reasons—curiosity, ambition, and external influences—that drove him into this perilous situation, though none alone justify the risks he’s taken.

Throughout the chapter, themes of power, tradition, and unpredictability intertwine. Jorg’s internal conflict between pragmatism and defiance highlights his complex character, while the hostile environment of Kutta underscores the fragility of societal

protections in a fractured world. The tension between Jorg and Marco, coupled with the looming threat of unseen adversaries, sets the stage for further intrigue and danger in their journey.

Chapter 33

The chapter begins with the narrator, exhausted from travel, drifting in and out of sleep in a carriage. The journey is marked by discomfort and shifting companions, including Osser Gant and Katherine. In a dreamlike state, the narrator senses Katherine’s presence, which pulls him into a shared vision. Through this connection, he finds himself inhabiting the body of Robart Hool, a spy in the Tall Castle, who is sleepwalking under Katherine’s guidance. The narrator questions her motives, revealing tensions and past lessons about trust and vigilance instilled by the church.

Katherine directs Hool through the castle’s underground vaults, a place filled with ancestral tombs and eerie familiarity. The narrator recognizes the setting as the Tall Castle’s crypts, where the dead of House Ancrath lie. As Hool moves deeper, the narrator grows uneasy, suspecting Katherine may be leading him to confront a personal trauma or a new tragedy. The cold, ancient corridors evoke memories of his family’s history, including the repurposed statues of the Or dynasty, now altered to represent Ancrath ancestors.

The tension escalates when Hool encounters a group of mire-ghouls—decayed, sinister figures—heading toward the tombs. The narrator questions why Katherine hasn’t raised an alarm, realizing she prioritizes gathering information over immediate action. The ghouls’ presence suggests a necromantic threat, possibly linked to the dead regaining strength. The narrator reflects on the nature of death and resurrection, drawing parallels to his own experiences with ghosts and the lichkin’s deceit.

In the final moments, Hool unsheathes his sword, defying Katherine’s warnings, as the ghouls approach the tomb of the narrator’s mother. The narrator resolves to intervene, though his ability to control Hool remains uncertain. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, blending dread and determination as the narrator prepares to confront the ghouls and uncover Katherine’s true intentions. The scene underscores themes of loyalty, the

past’s haunting influence, and the blurred line between dreams and reality.

Chapter 34

In Chapter 32 of *Emperor of Thorns*, Jorg is handed his infant son, William, by his wife Miana as they travel by carriage toward Honth. Despite the baby's incessant crying and unappealing appearance, Jorg feels an unexpected protectiveness toward him, a vulnerability he recognizes as a weakness. Katherine, Jorg's aunt, watches the child with an inscrutable expression, raising tension as Jorg recalls past suspicions about her intentions. The scene underscores Jorg's internal conflict between his hardened nature and newfound paternal instincts, while the presence of Katherine adds an air of unease.

Katherine reveals a dire warning: someone nearby seeks to kill William, protected by the Pax Gilden, which prevents retaliation. She identifies the threat as Jarco Renar, Jorg's vengeful cousin, who holds a grudge for past betrayals and losses. Jarco's protection under the Pax makes him untouchable, and his potential proximity alarms Miana, who demands action. The revelation forces Jorg to confront the precarious safety of his son, highlighting the ruthless political landscape where even infants are not spared from vendettas.

Jorg devises a plan to counter Jarco's threat, ordering his loyal men, including Makin, to guard the carriage closely. He secretly offers a bounty for Jarco's death, knowing the act would require the killer to flee. Meanwhile, Miana pleads for additional protection, but Jorg dismisses the idea, acknowledging their vulnerability in hostile territory. The confrontation escalates when Captain Harran of the emperor's guard intervenes, asserting Jarco's immunity under the Pax and mocking Jorg's limited forces. The standoff emphasizes Jorg's precarious position against both familial enemies and imperial authority.

The chapter culminates in a tense exchange as Jorg, undeterred by Harran's warnings, prepares to take matters into his own hands. He retrieves a crossbow, testing the

limits of the Pax’s protections and signaling his defiance. The scene captures Jorg’s ruthless pragmatism and his willingness to risk everything for his son, even as the odds stack against him. The chapter leaves readers on edge, anticipating the fallout from Jorg’s next move and the looming threat of Jarco’s vengeance.

Chapter 35

The chapter opens with Jorg, the protagonist, enduring an uncomfortable camel journey through the Margins of the Sahar Desert. He exchanges threats with his unruly camel and reflects on the beast's hostile nature, contrasting it with horseback riding. Jorg and his companion Marco are part of a caravan led by Taureg drovers, including a man named Omal, who offers unsolicited advice. The journey was arranged by Michael, a Builder-ghost, hinting at the hidden influence of these ancient entities. Jorg's sarcastic demeanor and sharp wit are on full display as he navigates the physical and social challenges of the trip.

Jorg engages in a tense conversation with Marco and Michael, revealing his knowledge of the Builder-ghosts' factions. He speculates about their motives, suggesting some support the Prince of Arrow for emperor while others seek to eradicate all life. Michael, an enigmatic figure with unsettling eyes, dismisses Fexler Brews—another Builder-ghost—as insignificant, calling him a mere "gatekeeper." Jorg, however, sees Fexler as a potential ally with a "third way" that diverges from the destructive paths of the other factions. The dialogue underscores the political and existential stakes of the conflict between humans and the Builder-ghosts.

The Margins are described as a desolate, fissured landscape teeming with hidden dangers. The caravan includes Taureg traders, drovers, and Ha’tari mercenaries who protect them from nocturnal predators. Around a campfire, Jorg questions Marco about their mission and the motives of Ibn Fayed, a powerful figure who initially opposed their journey but now allows it. Marco, a banker with limited understanding of the Builder-ghosts, seems oblivious to the deeper implications of their travel. Jorg’s suspicion grows as he notices Marco’s unusually heavy trunk, hinting at hidden secrets tied to the Builders’ technology.

The chapter closes with Jorg’s realization that Marco’s trunk might contain Builder artifacts, given its excessive weight. This triggers a memory of a similar heavy object from his past, suggesting Marco’s involvement with the Builders is more significant than he lets on. The journey through the Margins, fraught with physical discomfort and cryptic revelations, sets the stage for further intrigue as Jorg pieces together the true nature of the forces at play. The chapter blends action, dialogue, and world-building to advance the overarching plot while deepening the mystery surrounding the Builder-ghosts.

Chapter 36

The chapter opens with the protagonist and his companions, including Marco and Omal, crossing the Sahar desert from Maroc into Liba, reflecting on the shifting borders and the cautionary tale of "the camel’s nose." They arrive at Hamada, a city rising from the desert, characterized by whitewashed mud buildings and a hidden aquifer that sustains life. The city’s grandeur becomes apparent as they approach, with towering structures and Moorish-inspired architecture hinting at its wealthy past. The group’s arrival is marked by the camels’ eagerness for water and the bustling activity of the market square, where merchants await their goods.

As they explore Hamada, the protagonist notes the stark contrast between the city’s opulence and his own disheveled state. Marco observes the wealth that has flowed through the region, momentarily dropping his usual sneer. The group hires an old man with a donkey to transport Marco’s trunk to the caliph’s palace, but the protagonist’s unease grows. He reflects on the trap he’s walking into, comparing his situation to Brother Hendrick’s fatal impalement. Despite his fears, he resolves to press on, armed with hidden weapons and a determination for revenge against Ibn Fayed and Qalasadi.

The protagonist and Marco part ways, with Marco heading to the palace to collect a debt from Ibn Fayed, while the protagonist seeks Qalasadi’s tower. The tower, known as Mathema, stands tall and isolated, its smooth surface devoid of easy entry. The protagonist attempts to solve a numerical puzzle on the black crystal door but fails repeatedly. Frustrated, he uses the view-ring, which triggers a dramatic reaction—lightning, humming, and a rising pitch—suggesting the door’s magical nature. The chapter ends abruptly as the door’s transformation intensifies, leaving the outcome uncertain.

Throughout the chapter, themes of revenge, isolation, and the clash between past and present are prominent. The protagonist’s journey is both physical and psychological,

as he navigates the desert’s harshness and the political intrigue of Hamada. The tower’s enigmatic door symbolizes the barriers he must overcome, both literal and metaphorical, to achieve his goals. The chapter blends vivid descriptions of the desert city with tense, introspective moments, creating a sense of impending confrontation.

Chapter 37

The chapter opens with the protagonist reflecting on his encounter with the order of mathmagicians, who no longer seek his death, allowing him to likewise spare them. He contemplates the nature of prophecy, questioning whether the accuracy of soothsayers and mathematicians stems from their intense desire to see the future rather than their methods. This introspection leads him to consider his own desires and whether his willpower might defy their predictions. Meanwhile, he sets aside his thirst for vengeance against Qalasadi, acknowledging that his fondness for the man, rather than moral growth, motivated this decision.

As the protagonist prepares to meet the caliph, Qalasadi and Yusuf accompany him, assuring him that his fate has already been calculated but refusing to reveal the outcome to avoid altering it. The group passes through the mathmagicians' tower, now missing its front door due to the protagonist's earlier actions, and observes students attempting to reconstruct it. The journey to the caliph’s palace highlights the stark contrast between the desert’s harshness and the palace’s opulence, with its grand architecture and lack of defensive features, reflecting its purpose for pleasure rather than war.

Upon arrival, the protagonist notes the palace’s lavish design, including towering ebony doors inlaid with gold, symbolizing the caliph’s immense wealth. He feels vulnerable, realizing he is deep in enemy territory with no allies or bargaining power, save for a trick he played in the desert. Qalasadi reassures him that the caliph, Ibn Fayed, is honorable, though not necessarily good. As the doors open, Yusuf hints that the protagonist still has one friend left to make in the desert, leaving him with a cryptic piece of advice before he steps into the throne room.

The chapter concludes with the protagonist walking toward the caliph’s throne, his mind racing with fragmented thoughts and strategies. The tension builds as he

prepares to face Ibn Fayed, uncertain of his fate but resolved to navigate the encounter with whatever wit and willpower he can muster. The scene underscores the themes of destiny, power, and the unpredictable nature of human relationships, leaving the reader anticipating the outcome of this high-stakes meeting.

Chapter 38

In Chapter 36 of *Emperor of Thorns*, Jorg reunites with Ibn Fayed, the Caliph of Liba, who offers him a seat of honor and discusses the looming threat posed by the "Builder-ghosts"—ancient remnants of a lost civilization. Ibn Fayed proposes an alliance to destroy these relics, fearing their potential to enslave or annihilate humanity. Jorg, however, remains skeptical, recalling his mentor Lundist's wisdom about learning from history. The conversation shifts to the upcoming Congression, where Ibn Fayed expresses cautious support for Orrin of Arrow as a potential emperor, citing external threats from the Cerani Empire as motivation for unity.

Jorg spends a month in Liba, studying their culture and mathematics, though he finds little passion in the latter. During his stay, he retrieves the view-ring, a mysterious artifact linked to the Builders. One evening, while poring over equations, the ring unexpectedly activates, summoning the spectral image of Fexler Brews, a long-dead Builder. Their exchange is tense and philosophical, with Jorg questioning Fexler's true nature—whether he is a mere prediction or a living entity. Fexler deflects, probing Jorg's plans and subtly guiding him toward Vyene, hinting at the ring's significance and the throne's secrets.

Their dialogue delves into existential themes, with Jorg confronting his own trapped past and Fexler challenging his assumptions about life, death, and religion. Jorg mentions encounters with supernatural beings, like an angel, but Fexler dismisses these as misunderstandings of Builder technology. The conversation underscores the chapter's central tension: the clash between ancient knowledge and human interpretation. Fexler's cryptic advice and Jorg's introspection reveal the deeper stakes of their world's unraveling order.

The chapter closes with Jorg's resolve to travel to Vyene, driven by fragmented memories and Fexler's nudging. His journey symbolizes both a physical and

metaphysical quest—to confront the empire’s fractured legacy and his own haunted history. The interplay of politics, ancient technology, and personal reckoning sets the stage for Jorg’s next steps, leaving readers with lingering questions about power, identity, and the ghosts of the past.

Chapter 39

The chapter follows Chella, a necromancer and delegate of the Dead King, as she travels with her companion Kai and the Gilden Guard toward Honth. The unsettling presence of the lichkin Keres lingers, having departed to rejoin the Dead King through fractures between the living world and death's domain. Captain Axtis, eager to maintain morale, urges swift progress, but Chella remains preoccupied with her mission and the Dead King's unsettling plans. Tensions simmer between her and Kai, whose fleeting moment of intimacy is dismissed as trivial by Chella, who is more consumed by her disdain for life and the burdens of her role.

During a stop in Wendmere, the Gilden Guard's opulence and detachment from the common folk are highlighted, with Kai criticizing their elite status as superficial. Chella, though more diplomatic, shares his skepticism about their combat prowess. The guard's lavish treatment contrasts sharply with the impoverished followers trailing them, including sex workers bound by desperation. Chella's thoughts drift to the lurking threat of Thantos, another lichkin, and her unease grows as she reflects on Keres' recent injuries, which remain unexplained. The chapter underscores the fragility of their journey and the hidden dangers ahead.

Captain Axtis recounts the guard's last battle decades prior, revealing their lack of recent experience, which Chella notes with grim amusement. She suspects Axtis might prefer to dispose of her and Kai to thwart the Dead King's influence at the upcoming Congression. Despite her cynicism, Chella finds herself momentarily distracted by the countryside's fleeting beauty, though she quickly chastises herself for such weakness. The chapter emphasizes her internal struggle between her necromantic detachment and the lingering pull of life's sensations.

The journey is interrupted by an unexpected confrontation as another delegate, later revealed to be Jorg Ancrath, demands access to Chella's carriage. Axtis attempts to

block him, but Jorg’s forceful demeanor overrides the captain’s authority. The chapter ends abruptly as Kai opens the door, setting the stage for a tense encounter between Chella and Jorg, hinting at deeper conflicts to come. This interruption underscores the political tensions and unpredictable alliances shaping their path to Vyene.

Chapter 40

The chapter opens with Jorg, the protagonist, leaving his family behind to confront his past, symbolized by Chella and the Dead King. Despite his hardened exterior, he acknowledges a lingering desire for familial love and redemption, though he dismisses these as weaknesses. Riding toward the "damned," he reflects on the impossibility of fulfilling societal expectations—being a father and savior—given his dark history. The passage underscores his internal conflict between his violent nature and the fleeting hope for a different life.

Jorg encounters Chella and Kai Summerson in the Dead King’s carriage, noting Chella’s transformed appearance—more subdued yet still enigmatic. Their exchange is tense, with Jorg openly threatening her, only for her to deflect by mentioning the Nuban’s forgiveness. The dialogue reveals their fraught history and Jorg’s unresolved anger. Kai’s reaction to the Dead King’s name hints at the terror he inspires, setting the stage for the chapter’s central mystery: the Dead King’s origins and ambitions.

The conversation shifts to the Dead King’s motives, with Chella suggesting Ancrath is strategically vital as a gateway to the continent. She implies Jorg’s notoriety has drawn the Dead King’s attention, though Jorg remains skeptical. The discussion touches on the Congression, where other powerful and monstrous figures, like the Queen of Red and the Silent Sister, will gather. Chella cryptically hints at the Dead King’s grand design, describing the world as a "lock and lever" connecting heaven, hell, and earth, with the Dead King seeking to disrupt this balance.

The chapter concludes with Jorg pressing Chella for answers about the Dead King’s origins, but she offers only vague, unsettling replies. Kai reveals the Dead King’s ambition to "break open the gates of heaven," emphasizing his disregard for consequences. Chella’s final revelation—that the Dead King is younger than Jorg—adds to the mystery, leaving Jorg (and the reader) with more questions than answers. The

chapter masterfully blends personal tension with larger existential threats, deepening the intrigue around the Dead King’s rise.

Chapter 41

The chapter opens with Chella, Jorg, and Kai crossing the Tyrol bridge, engaging in a tense conversation about love and perception. Jorg references a legend that the river appears blue to those in love, but Chella dismisses it as nonsense, calling the river "shit brown." The exchange reveals their cynical views on love, with Jorg suggesting that belief can transform reality. Kai remains mostly silent, adding to the uneasy dynamic. The dialogue underscores the characters' hardened perspectives, with Jorg hinting at the transformative yet destructive power of conviction.

As the carriage moves on, Chella taunts Jorg, urging him to return to his queen, though she secretly wishes he would stay. Their verbal sparring escalates into a discussion about their motives for attending Congression, a political gathering. Jorg probes Chella about the Dead King's intentions, while she deflects with sharp retorts, accusing him of hypocrisy. The tension between them is palpable, blending hostility and attraction. Jorg's grip on her thigh symbolizes their combative relationship, where pain and desire intertwine.

The confrontation reaches its peak when Jorg dismisses Kai, leaving him alone with Chella. Their unresolved tension erupts into a violent, passionate encounter, marked by physical aggression and raw need. The coupling is far from tender, reflecting their damaged natures and mutual distrust. Despite the intensity, both remain defiant, with Chella reveling in the life-force it awakens in her. The scene highlights their shared darkness, where even intimacy is a battleground.

Afterward, Jorg leaves with a warning, reminding Chella of his threat to kill her if she harms his son. Their parting words are laced with bitterness and unresolved conflict, yet there's a strange acknowledgment of their twisted connection. Chella is left exhilarated but unsettled, while Jorg returns to his queen, seemingly unaffected. The chapter closes with a sense of inevitability, foreshadowing future confrontations at

Congression, where their schemes and animosities will collide once more.

Chapter 42

The protagonist rides toward the delegations of Ancrath and Renar, reflecting on his complicated relationships with Katherine and Miana. He acknowledges his flaws and the poor choices he's made, including his recent encounter with Chella, which he rationalizes as an inevitable act of desire. His companions, Makin and Red Kent, join him, their banter hinting at their shared history and unspoken understanding. The protagonist's physical wounds and emotional burdens weigh on him as he navigates the tension between his responsibilities and his impulses.

Upon reaching Holland's carriage, the protagonist engages in sharp exchanges with Katherine and Miana, revealing past conflicts and alliances. The conversation touches on themes of power, survival, and the lingering scars of past battles. Meanwhile, the protagonist observes the devastation wrought by the Dead King's forces, including the burning of the Tall Castle and the encroaching threat of his undead legions. The sight stirs a mix of anger and helplessness, as he grapples with the loss of his father and the unfinished business between them.

The protagonist's thoughts shift to his advisors, Coddin and Fexler Brews, who had grand visions of restoring the world to its former state. He dismisses their ideals as impractical, cynically noting that he alone must face the impending crisis in Vyene. The chapter underscores the futility of their prophecies and the protagonist's resignation to his role in a seemingly doomed world. The weight of leadership and the inevitability of conflict loom large as he contemplates the stakes of the coming confrontation.

As the journey continues, the weather mirrors the grim mood, with cold rain and fog symbolizing the deteriorating situation. The protagonist's internal turmoil contrasts with the quiet determination of his companions. The chapter closes with a sense of foreboding, as the group nears Vyene, where the final battle—and potential

annihilation—awaits. The protagonist’s reflections on fate, power, and legacy underscore the chapter’s themes of inevitability and the harsh realities of leadership.

Chapter 43

Chella and Kai arrive in Allenhaure, only to find the town overcrowded with King Jorg's escort. Despite Kai's warnings about discontent among the guards, Chella insists on moving on, but a sudden sense of wrongness stops her. She detects the presence of a lichkin, Thantos, a harbinger of death that unsettles them both. Realizing the Dead King's plan is still in motion, Chella resigns herself to her role and instructs Kai to procure ale laced with Styx water, a poison that will incapacitate the guards. The tension is palpable as they prepare for the grim task ahead.

As night falls, Chella and Kai reflect on their circumstances while the poisoned ale takes effect. Kai shares a haunting memory of nearly leaping from a cliff, symbolizing his desire to escape his past. Chella, meanwhile, muses on the impossibility of fleeing one's identity. Their conversation is interrupted by the eerie silence of the camp, where the guards lie dead or dying, their bodies soon to be reanimated by necromancy. The lichkin's presence looms, and the air thickens with dread as the dead begin to rise, their movements unnatural and unsettling.

The horror escalates as the dead guards, including Captain Axtis, reanimate, their eyes unblinking and their bodies eerily lifeless. Chella explains that the Dead King's forces will absorb the remaining survivors, though Kai questions the logic behind such a blatant act of terror. Chella avoids revealing the Dead King's true motives, hinting at her own discomfort with the plan. The scene is suffused with a sense of inevitability, as the mist rises and the rain pours, underscoring the unnatural reversal of life and death.

As the reality of their actions sinks in, Kai expresses fear of the consequences, knowing discovery will lead to brutal retribution. Chella remains cryptic, emphasizing the Dead King's inscrutable reasons. She decides they must leave immediately, preferring the open road to sharing a carriage with the malevolent Thantos. The chapter closes with a chilling atmosphere, as the pair prepares to flee, leaving behind

a field of the undead and the lingering weight of their complicity in the Dead King’s dark designs.

Chapter 44

The chapter opens with King Jorg and his companions arriving in Vyene, the grandest city of the empire, where centuries of wealth have been poured into its awe-inspiring architecture. The group is struck by the city’s magnificence, with Makin remarking that even Lord Holland would seem a peasant in such splendor. Jorg reflects on his family’s rise to power after the empire’s collapse, noting the opulent summer homes of nobles lining the approach to the palace. Despite the grandeur, an undercurrent of tension pervades the streets, marked by bonefires and restless crowds, hinting at deeper unrest.

As Jorg’s procession moves toward the palace, the scale of Vyene’s grandeur becomes even more apparent, with roads wide enough to accommodate massive columns of soldiers and carriages. The mood shifts as Jorg grows grim, contemplating his impending role as emperor and the weight of his past. He acknowledges his inability to escape the hooks of his history, even as he prepares to ascend to a higher throne. The vast square surrounding the emperor’s palace, usually bustling with activity, lies empty except for the autumn winds, adding to the solemnity of the moment.

The scene takes a dramatic turn when the group encounters a line of papal guards blocking their path. A lavish sedan chair reveals the Pope, a grotesque and heavily adorned figure, who demands a private audience with Jorg. The absurdity of the situation is not lost on Jorg, who quips about the Pope’s infallibility and ridiculous attire. Despite the humor, the encounter carries weight, as the Pope emphasizes the secrecy of their conversation, suggesting its significance in the broader political landscape.

The chapter closes with the Pope’s attempt to establish a clandestine dialogue with Jorg, hinting at hidden agendas and the manipulation of power behind the scenes. Her isolation from her usual retinue underscores the meeting’s importance, as she seeks to

influence Jorg without official records. The tension between the two figures is palpable, with Jorg’s sarcasm masking his wariness. The encounter sets the stage for future conflicts, as Jorg navigates the treacherous path toward the throne while confronting the shadows of his past and the machinations of those around him.

Chapter 45

The chapter opens with the protagonist, Jorg, anticipating an attack from papal guards after killing the Pope. He taunts them, drawing his sword Gog, while Captain Devers of the Gilden Guard attempts to intervene. A chaotic battle ensues as the papal guards and even the Pope's bearers turn on Jorg, but the Gilden Guard swiftly overpower them. The confrontation ends with Jorg asserting his dominance, claiming the Pope's death was justified retaliation for her actions against his son. He coldly instructs Devers to cover up the incident, framing it as an attack by a mythical lichkin to avoid political fallout.

Jorg then outlines his ruthless political strategy, threatening massive retaliation if his demands are not met. He warns that failure to crown him emperor will lead to a devastating war against Roma, leveraging the Gilden Guard's disdain for the Church to ensure their compliance. His ally Makin expresses skepticism about the feasibility of suppressing such a high-profile assassination, but Jorg dismisses his concerns, confident that the isolated location and lack of witnesses will prevent accusations from gaining traction. His tone is calculating, blending threats with pragmatic solutions to consolidate power.

The scene shifts to Jorg's confrontation with Kent, a loyal but devout follower conflicted by the Pope's murder. Jorg challenges Kent's faith, urging him to act on his instincts and strike him down if he deems it morally necessary. Kent refuses, reaffirming his loyalty despite his inner turmoil. This moment reveals Jorg's willingness to face consequences for his actions, even as he manipulates those around him to serve his ambitions. The exchange underscores the tension between Jorg's ruthless pragmatism and Kent's newfound religious convictions.

The chapter concludes with Jorg returning to his companions, who react with shock and horror at his bloodstained appearance. His wife, Miana, and others question his

actions, but Jorg remains unrepentant, framing the Pope’s death as a necessary step to liberate the empire from the Church’s oppressive influence. His defiant justification highlights his unshakable resolve and sets the stage for the political upheaval to come, leaving the reader with a sense of impending conflict and moral ambiguity.

Chapter 46

The chapter opens with the protagonist, a road-weary traveler, attempting to enter the walled city of Vyene, hailed as the greatest city on earth. A skeptical guard initially bars his entry, but a bribe of copper coins secures passage. Inside, the city’s grandeur is obscured by industrial sprawl and mundane structures, though the old city behind the walls holds promise. The protagonist reflects on his journey, missing his horse Gerrod, and seeks shelter from a sudden downpour in a nearby inn, where he bargains for a room and a meal amidst the ale-room’s grimy atmosphere.

After a restless night plagued by bedbugs and memories of a knife wound from Mazeno Port, the protagonist wakes to a frosty morning. He ventures deeper into Vyene, observing its stark contrasts: beggar children starve in the streets while affluent neighborhoods enforce exclusivity. His destination is West Street, lined with opulent trading houses, where he seeks a tailor to outfit himself as a king. The House of Revel, a high-end establishment, catches his eye, though its pretentious air and dismissive staff initially rebuff him.

Undeterred, the protagonist forces his way into the tailor’s shop, interrupting a fitting session for a wealthy client. The staff, including an androgynous doorkeeper named Kevin, are startled by his intrusion. The protagonist’s rough appearance clashes with the shop’s luxury, and the patron, a pompous noble, demands his removal. However, the protagonist counters by displaying a gold coin, signaling his ability to pay and his intent to acquire clothing fit for nobility. His confidence and disregard for social niceties unsettle the tailor and his client.

The chapter highlights the protagonist’s resourcefulness and determination as he navigates Vyene’s hierarchical society. His journey from the city’s outskirts to its elite enclaves underscores themes of class disparity and the performative nature of power. The encounter at the House of Revel sets the stage for his transformation into a figure

worthy of the imperial court, blending cunning with a king’s ambition. The narrative’s gritty realism and sharp dialogue reinforce the protagonist’s roguish charm and strategic mind.

Chapter 47

The chapter opens with the protagonist, Jorg, arriving at the Gilden Gate, a modest yet significant archway deep within the palace. Accompanied by Sindri and Hemmet, the Lord Commander of the Gilden Guard, Jorg is surprised by the Gate's unassuming appearance—a simple oak arch, worn smooth by time. When he attempts to pass through, he is struck by intense pain from his old wounds and the weight of the thorn-patterned box at his hip, forcing him to retreat. Hemmet explains that the Gate prevents anyone "tainted" by magic or ungodly powers from entering, ensuring the purity of the Hundred's gatherings.

Excluded from the main entrance, Jorg is led through dark, sparsely lit corridors by Captain Kosson. The passageways, devoid of decorative niches, reveal remnants of Builder technology, such as non-functional ceiling lights. Kosson shares that the palace was once a grand Builder legislature, challenging Jorg's perception of their utilitarian nature. The conversation shifts when Kosson reveals a Builder frozen in stasis, a custodian whose appearance and tools mirror Hemmet's staff of office. This discovery hints at a deeper connection between the Gilden Guard and the Builders, blurring the lines between history and legend.

The frozen Builder, identified as a custodian, is described as weak and fearful, contrasting with the strength often attributed to his kind. Kosson reveals that Hemmet traces his lineage back to this figure, whom the Guard reveres as a patron saint. Jorg notes the similarity between the custodian's rod and Hemmet's staff, suggesting a deliberate emulation of Builder symbolism. This encounter raises questions about the Roma's canonization of a Builder, hinting at a complex interplay of power, tradition, and forgotten history.

Reunited with Sindri and Elin before the throne, Jorg is reassured that his scars are not seen as a taint by the North. The throne itself, a plain yet ancient wooden chair, is

rumored to have once seated Builder kings. The chapter closes with Jorg standing before the throne, the grandeur of the dome-covered hall underscoring the weight of history and the unresolved tensions between past and present. The scene sets the stage for deeper exploration of power, legacy, and the lingering influence of the Builders.

Chapter 48

The chapter opens with Jorg and Elin interrupted by Father Merrin, a blind priest claiming to foresee the future. Merrin reveals his identity as a priest of the Free Church of Adam and hints at his purpose: to assist Jorg in accessing something beneath the throne. Jorg is skeptical but intrigued, especially when Merrin accurately describes his hidden intentions, including his desire to use a mysterious ring. The priest explains that helping Jorg will ultimately benefit the Free Church by securing a future favor from Lord Commander Hemmet, though his vision of the specifics remains unclear.

Jorg, Elin, and Father Merrin proceed to the throne room, where Merrin convinces Hemmet to move the throne and rug, revealing a copper plate embedded in the floor. Jorg uses the view-ring on the plate, triggering the appearance of two Builder-ghosts: the Custodian, revered by Hemmet and his guards, and Fexler, a familiar figure to Jorg. The ghosts briefly clash before vanishing, causing the Builder lights to flare and steel doors to temporarily seal the room. The sudden activation of ancient technology creates chaos, with guards scrambling to assess the situation.

The commotion intensifies when the real Custodian, awakened from stasis by Fexler’s interference, is brought into the throne room. Hemmet and his guards react with awe, treating the Custodian as a saint, while Jorg and Sindri’s party observe with curiosity. The Custodian, disoriented and speaking an unfamiliar language, repeatedly mentions the word "alert," adding to the mystery. His presence underscores the chapter’s theme of ancient forces resurfacing and disrupting the present.

The chapter concludes with Jorg reflecting on the linguistic diversity of the Builders, hinting at deeper historical complexities. The encounter leaves lingering questions about the Custodian’s role, the significance of the ring, and how Jorg’s actions will shape future events. The blend of political maneuvering, supernatural elements, and technological relics creates a tense and enigmatic atmosphere, setting the stage for

further revelations.

Chapter 49

The chapter opens with the protagonist and his retinue advancing toward the emperor’s palace in Vyene, a massive sandstone structure held together by gravity alone. The Pope’s corpse lies abandoned amid the aftermath of violence, and the protagonist reflects on the power he might wield with an army at his back. The mood is somber, underscored by the cold wind and the clatter of hooves. The protagonist’s grief over his father’s death resurfaces, leaving him feeling hollow and unresolved, as he grapples with the irreversible nature of his actions and the scars they’ve left behind.

As the group approaches the palace, the protagonist contemplates the weight of his ambitions and the legacy he might leave. He acknowledges the futility of seeking justice or redemption for past wrongs, symbolized by the thorns etched into his wrist. The world around him seems to mirror his turmoil, with columns of smoke rising in the distance, hinting at unseen threats—possibly the Dead King’s forces or another army. The protagonist’s cynicism and weariness are palpable as he dismisses the idea of favor from dead emperors, instead focusing on the political maneuvering ahead.

The grandeur of the palace contrasts with the protagonist’s inner turmoil. The Hall of Emperors, lined with statues of past rulers, serves as a reminder of the legacy he seeks to join—or defy. Katherine challenges his motives, questioning whether his desire for power is truly about saving the empire or merely personal ambition. The protagonist’s response is ambiguous, suggesting a mix of duty and darker impulses. The tension between his public persona and private struggles is evident as they prepare to enter the throne room, where weapons must be surrendered and searches conducted.

The chapter concludes with an unexpected encounter with Dr. Taproot, whose eccentric demeanor provides a brief respite from the gravity of the situation. His

condolences for the protagonist’s father’s death are met with a mix of irritation and resignation, further highlighting the protagonist’s unresolved grief. The scene underscores the theme of legacy and the inescapable weight of the past, as the protagonist stands on the threshold of a pivotal moment in his quest for power, surrounded by both allies and unseen dangers.

Chapter 50

This chapter, 'Chapter 48', is rich in content and well worth a careful read.

Chapter 51

As Chella’s undead column nears Vyene, the imperial city, the towns along the Danoob River merge into a sprawling mass. The necromantic power within her has waned, forcing her to shout commands to her restless cavalry, whose horses resist their undead riders. Kai, her companion, questions their abrupt halt, and Chella reveals her need to consult Thantos, a lichkin. Reflecting on her descent into darkness, she acknowledges her irreversible path, yet feels no remorse. The scene underscores the unnatural alliance between the living and the dead, and Chella’s cold acceptance of her role in the Dead King’s grim campaign.

Chella and Kai approach a carriage housing Thantos, a malevolent entity. When she opens the door, a gray contagion engulfs Kai, transforming him into a vessel for the lichkin. The gruesome process highlights the horror of Thantos’s existence and the expendable nature of Chella’s allies. She coldly explains to the now-possessed Kai that he was always meant as a host, a secret kept to ensure the Dead King’s plans remained undisclosed. The scene reinforces the theme of betrayal and the ruthless efficiency of the undead forces, with Chella dismissing Kai’s suffering as inevitable.

The chapter shifts to Vyene’s outskirts, where chaos reigns as the Dead King’s influence spreads. The dead rise from graves, and black smoke signals destruction. Despite the city’s defenses—guards and archers—Chella’s column passes unchallenged, their true nature unnoticed. Thantos’s presence unnerves the guards, but they are too preoccupied to investigate. The grandeur of Vyene contrasts sharply with Chella’s grim existence, filling her with resentment. She takes solace in the thought of the city’s eventual ruin, envisioning it as a necropolis under the Dead King’s rule.

As Chella’s group advances toward the palace, they encounter signs of recent violence, which thrills Thantos. The sheer scale of the palace overwhelms Chella,

deepening her sense of insignificance. Upon arrival, they bypass their assigned station and enter the grand entrance, causing confusion among the guards. Thantos emerges, his presence paralyzing the men with dread. The chapter ends with a chilling reminder of the lichkin’s power and the inevitability of the Dead King’s conquest, as Chella and her undead forces prepare to unleash their final assault.

Chapter 52

In Chapter 50 of *Emperor of Thorns*, King Jorg urgently seeks to expedite the selection of an emperor during the Congression, a process that has dragged on for over a century. Despite Taproot’s skepticism about the possibility of speed, Jorg insists on immediate action, sensing an impending threat. He identifies Costos of the Port Kingdoms as the leader of a major faction and decides to confront him directly, disregarding protocol by approaching the throne to communicate with Fexler, a mysterious figure who controls the environment. Fexler responds subtly, confirming his presence and willingness to assist Jorg.

Jorg’s boldness draws the attention of Costos, who initially dismisses him as a “boy” but quickly reevaluates when Jorg reveals his political leverage. Costos proposes a private meeting in the Roman room, where Jorg agrees to negotiate alone, leaving Taproot behind. The tension escalates as Jorg enters the room, where Costos and his allies await, confident in their dominance. However, Jorg turns the tables by sealing the door with Fexler’s help, trapping the group inside and asserting his control over the situation.

What follows is a brutal and calculated display of violence as Jorg swiftly kills Costos and several others with the Orlanth rod, demonstrating his lethal skill and strategic ruthlessness. The remaining men, shocked and disorganized, struggle to comprehend the sudden shift in power dynamics. Jorg’s perspective—that they are trapped with him, not the other way around—highlights his unorthodox and terrifying approach to leadership. His actions are driven by a blend of urgency, pragmatism, and a willingness to embrace chaos to achieve his goals.

The chapter concludes with a flashback to Jorg’s training under Tutor Lundist, who taught him the art of stick-fighting to instill discipline and adaptability. This skill proves critical in the present confrontation, as Jorg channels Lundist’s lessons to dominate his

opponents. The juxtaposition of past mentorship and present violence underscores Jorg’s complex character—a product of rigorous training and unrelenting ambition, now unleashed in his ruthless pursuit of power.

Chapter 53

Chella observes Thantos, a lichkin, reanimating the corpses of fallen guards at the empire’s open gates, following the Dead King’s command. The undead rise clumsily, driven by primal instincts and sin. Thantos’s presence evokes overwhelming grief, and when it leaves Kai’s body, it disperses into the shadows, creating an aura of dread. Chella administers a black vial’s contents—ichor from a desecrated tomb—to revive Kai, who becomes a vessel for the Dead King. The potion accelerates the Dead King’s possession, transforming Kai into a powerful conduit for his dark will.

The Dead King, now fully inhabiting Kai’s body, revels in his renewed strength, declaring himself “death in life.” His presence amplifies the power of the reanimated dead, who grow stronger and more sinister under his influence. Chella is both awed and terrified by his overwhelming power, though his exultation quickly shifts to cold determination. The Dead King’s mere existence radiates a sense of profound loss and betrayal, marking him as a figure of unparalleled horror, even without witnessed atrocities.

With the Dead King at full power, Chella leads him and an army of over two hundred reanimated golden-armored soldiers through the palace gates. The Dead King’s focus turns to Congression, where he plans to decapitate the empire’s leadership, claiming dominion over all. His command is absolute, and Chella obeys without hesitation, despite her fear. The chapter underscores the Dead King’s terrifying authority and the swift, unstoppable corruption he brings.

The chapter culminates in a chilling declaration: the Dead King intends to seize control by eliminating the empire’s leaders. His presence transforms the undead into a formidable force, and his strategic ruthlessness is clear. Chella, though a necromancer, is dwarfed by his malevolence, serving as a reluctant guide to his apocalyptic ambitions. The scene sets the stage for a confrontation that will decide the empire’s

fate, emphasizing the Dead King’s relentless and overwhelming threat.

Chapter 54

The chapter opens with Jorg entering a chamber filled with the rulers of various nations, who bombard him with questions about the mysterious events involving Costos Portico. Jorg asserts control by manipulating the lighting, silencing the crowd, and boldly seating himself on the throne. He coldly confirms Costos's death and dismisses the uproar, redirecting focus to the urgent matters of Congression. His unapologetic demeanor and strategic use of intimidation set the tone for the political maneuvering to come.

Jorg privately instructs Taproot to identify and neutralize his enemies, signaling his willingness to use violence to secure power. He hints at a looming apocalyptic threat—the Dead King—and implies that only his ruthless leadership can prevent global ruin. A cryptic exchange with Fexler suggests the presence of a hidden weapon beneath the throne room, adding to the tension. Jorg's interactions reveal his calculated brutality, as well as his awareness of the high stakes at play.

During a tense exchange with Lord Antas, Jorg rejects petty political bargaining, framing his bid for emperorship as a necessity beyond trivial negotiations. When Antas refuses to align with him, Jorg orchestrates his murder during a brief blackout, demonstrating his willingness to eliminate opposition. The act shocks the assembly, but Jorg seizes the moment to deliver a stirring speech, appealing to the rulers' sense of survival. He paints himself as the only leader capable of confronting the impending darkness.

As Jorg forces an early vote, key allies—including his grandfather and Ibn Fayed—publicly endorse him, signaling a shift in momentum. The chapter ends with the women at the Gilden Gate retreating, hinting at unresolved tensions. Jorg's blend of manipulation, violence, and rhetorical prowess underscores his determination to claim the throne, even as the threat of the Dead King looms over the fractured empire.

Chapter 55

The chapter delves into Jorg's harrowing confrontation with death and the blurred boundaries between reality and dreams. Reflecting on Brother Burlow's warnings about the seductive yet fatal "light" of dying, Jorg recounts his own experience with this light, describing it as a consuming furnace rather than a gentle dawn. His journey through death is depicted as an endless, cold ocean, where he awaits an angel. This surreal experience culminates in a moment of agony as he finds himself entangled in thorns, symbolizing both physical pain and existential torment. The angel, a figure of salvation, offers him escape, but Jorg remains skeptical, questioning the nature of his reality.

Jorg's struggle with pain and perception intensifies as he grapples with the idea that his entire life might be a dream. The angel reassures him that all dreams are real, blurring the lines between illusion and truth. This metaphysical dilemma is interrupted by a brutal flashback to his past, where he witnesses his brother William's violent death. The thorns, emblematic of suffering, become a metaphor for Jorg's inability to escape his trauma. Yet, through sheer will, he frees himself, crawling toward his brother in a poignant moment of unity, suggesting that their fates are inextricably linked.

The narrative shifts to a chilling memory of Jorg's father, King Olidan, who forces him to endure the torture of his dog, Justice. This scene underscores Jorg's internal conflict between self-preservation and loyalty. Despite his fear of fire, he ultimately embraces the flames to comfort Justice, symbolizing his acceptance of suffering and sacrifice. The fire mirrors the "white hunger" of death, a recurring motif that represents both destruction and purification. This act of defiance marks a turning point in Jorg's understanding of pain and redemption.

In the final section, Jorg reunites with William in a dreamlike afterlife, where they confront the illusion of heaven. Jorg dismisses the golden gates as a human construct, advocating for a deeper, more fundamental truth. Together, they seek a "wheel," a Builder-made mechanism that holds the key to saving their world from destruction. The chapter closes with Jorg's determination to turn the wheel, emphasizing themes of brotherhood, sacrifice, and the search for meaning beyond the illusions of life and death. The prose remains stark and visceral, mirroring Jorg's relentless pursuit of truth amid suffering.

Chapter 56

The chapter reflects on the aftermath of a world-altering event where magic has been severed, leaving the narrator—a data-ghost of Jorg of Ancrath—to document the restored reality. The narrator, composed of countless recorded moments, exists as a model created by a machine to determine if Jorg could be trusted to save the world. Though devoid of true life, the ghost retains echoes of Jorg’s emotions, including a faint but resonant love for Jorg’s son, Will. The absence of magic has ended grand illusions, but subtle, enduring human connections persist, hinting at a deeper, more meaningful enchantment.

Will, a curious and blunt six-year-old, frequently interacts with the ghost, questioning its nature and expressing longing for his real father. The ghost acknowledges its limitations, admitting it is merely an echo of Jorg, yet it finds solace in Will’s innocent joy. Their exchanges reveal the ghost’s self-awareness and its acceptance of its role as a fragmented remnant of a greater man. The chapter underscores the tension between memory and reality, as Will grapples with the ghost’s existence while the ghost wrestles with its own inadequacy.

The ghost reflects on its impact on those around it, particularly Miana and Katherine, who view it with sorrow or disdain. It acknowledges Jorg’s irreplaceability and the finality of death in a world now stripped of magic. Despite its ability to predict outcomes, the ghost chooses to embrace uncertainty, finding purpose in observing and recording rather than controlling. This resignation highlights the ghost’s acceptance of its ephemeral nature, as it retreats into the vast archives of the Builders, a realm of infinite possibilities.

The chapter concludes with a poignant acknowledgment of Jorg’s legacy. The ghost, having fulfilled its duty to tell Jorg’s story, relinquishes its narrative, imagining Jorg and his brother in an afterlife beyond its reach. The finality of "Finis" underscores the

ghost’s closure, as it fades into the background, leaving the story—and the world—to move forward without it. The ending balances melancholy with hope, suggesting that while magic is gone, the enduring power of memory and love remains.