

To ASENATH of FELIX'S WATCH

and to any of her FRIENDS who are not FOOLS.

Why do you think there can be politeness and kindness, when all you do is hurt us?

I come home to discover the Empire rotten and corrupted, and wolves warming themselves at the very hearth - and there you sit beside them and ask me to come join you for tea?

NO, ASENATH. NO. Not as a friend, while your patrons behave in a manner so unlike my Patron's friends.

I am not coming to meet you. I would be Killed, I would be devoured, my body cut apart and studied. The Highborn (or was it just you?) might have given me their word, but nine nations and an Empress haven't, and it wasn't Highborn who came to my home with blinding lights and bright blades and TOOK AND TOOK FROM MY DEFENCELESS FRIENDS - and then what did they say to Polyp, but that they did not know there was peace between you and me?

As if that mended all? The leader of the Sherard Hunters, the openers of the way: he met Polyp and his mouth opened and words came out, that he's angry at the way your own Empire's acted, but what is that worth? The Empire's shown all too well to my Patron that its memory's short and its will's fragmented.

The little finger of the left hand swears it won't hurt me, but the right hand has never heard of such an oath. A pretty pass it has come to, that SPRING should call the Empire fractured and disunited, but so it is. Or show me how I'm wrong. If my cause has so many friends in the Empire - then they can stop sitting on their hands and act!

Your new Archmage - of all your people, she might understand. I would - Llofir would - listen to her if she spoke, and she'd listen in turn: she has the power, she has the right, and she thinks right. But she knows, too, all too well she understands why I won't leave my home and come to you of my own will. Ask of Rosamund Holt the true face the Empire's people show to Spring.

LLOFIR tells me that BLASPHEMY AND HORROR fights alongside your armies, eating the slain in cruel parody of nature, starving the crows, and not growing fat and flourishing but simply heaping waste upon destruction - and even now allowed to roam UNCHECKED in the very heart of Dawn! Is this what the Empire has come to? If you speak as one of the Empire, do you know you are speaking for this? Let me speak for my Patron in turn, in the vain hope you can do something to turn your people from this path.

You truck with MY ENEMIES. You deal with the UNTHINKABLE. For short-term gain you summon the UNSPEAKABLE, because it will hurt your foes today. It is the forest fire that does not burn out, without the good rich ash.

It is like the Empire itself is becoming a husk, sustained beyond its time by magic, eating and eating but never growing strong and beautiful. And yet you invite me to your home AS IF YOU ARE MY FRIEND?

Or did they tell you of none of this? Am I to believe you are ignorant?

In sadness,

Gilean daughter of Gilead

P.S. You may tell Alcuin from my Patron that he may stick his BIZARRE attempt at a sacrifice up the south end of a north-bound ox. He knows the appropriate ritual if he wants a body eaten.