

These Stones Remember

by

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Companion Reader



Cover illustration: Sabira Langevin | Flower of Laurelin

This is the Companion Reader for These Stones Remember, and it will deal with some of the hints and clues and little Easter eggs that I peppered throughout the story. Think of this as your “did you spot that?” guidebook. It will also hold a few notes about what inspired certain things in each chapter, where I pulled certain ideas from. I’ll also call out any continuity errors (there’ll be a few of ‘em!) that ended up in the story over the year in which it was written.

I suggest opening it in a split window, so you can read it alongside each chapter, as I’m going to give you quite a few behind the scenes things that you might not have realised when you originally read the story.

Oh, and one final thing before we get started:

STOP! Just a warning that this companion reader will contain HUGE spoilers for the story, so if you’ve not read all the way through to the finale and epilogue, you might want to do that before tackling this companion reader.

Anyway, with that massive ramble out of the way, let’s duck behind the scenes of These Stones Remember.

Chapter 1

The copper ring

The static from Malin's fur etches a delicate pattern into the old verdigris patina of Pix's battered and worn copper ring. This is a tiny nod toward the shape of lightning burns, which we later learn that the Copper Crown gives to anyone other than the king if they touch it.

The spyglass

Many years ago, he'd walked with kings, and a king had gifted him this treasure on their first meeting.

This is a direct reference to Sausage giving everyone copper spyglasses in Pix's Empires S1 Ep1 when they all went caving. The amethyst crystal inlays on the spyglass came about because they were all so excited to find their first geode in the episode. (Plus, of course, in Minecraft you need both copper and amethyst to craft a spyglass.)

Continuity error no.1!

In this chapter I state that Pix's travel journal is bound in soft tan leather, but much later I said it was bound with thick card. In canon, it'll be leather-bound.

Continuity error no.2!

I also mentioned the bitter coffee that reminded Pix so much of home. Of course, later this was changed to spiced sha', and the notion of coffee was something brought to the Ancient Capital by traders from Sanctuary. However, Pix – while roaming around the world – wouldn't have all the things needed to prepare sha' so he probably carries a small tin of coffee with him. Let's just handwave that it reminds him of home in Oxford, in his days as a university professor ;)

Chapter 2

The broken redstone line

The grasses around the broken redstone line at the base of the statue were *'unnaturally dense, given the sparseness of the scrub around the rest of the savannah. Most likely there was a water source concealed beneath the ground.'* This is a reference to the fact that, in-game, Pix had a water stream sorting system installed in the catacombs.

The plastic spoon

Little-known factoid that I found while researching what a typical archaeologist might carry around in their toolkit: plastic spoons are used because they're small enough for delicate excavation work but are less likely to damage artifacts than a (usually metal) trowel might. [[Source](#)]

Cringe of the chapter

'Plain stone adjoining andesite'. I mean... wtf? I was definitely thinking with my Minecraft head still on when I wrote that one xD

Chapter 3

Pix preferring to use an axe as a weapon

Pretty much canon to how Pix plays Minecraft in general, this one. I've seen him advocate multiple times for a crit using an axe because it deals more damage to a single enemy than a sword does. In the story he uses a short axe, which hangs from his rucksack. Someone wandering the world in modern times would be far more likely to carry an axe to chop wood than a sword to kill things!

Malin's alarm

"old. dead things. death-decay-dust. treasures. secret deep clank thing danger. seep! ooze! death big grow!" – The first things Malin mentions are obvious, because it's a catacomb. There'll be dead things, decay, dust, and treasures. But the final part ("secret deep clank thing, seep, ooze, big death grow") is a reference to the Machine from Pix's S2 Ep2. I do make one more reference to the Machine, but never found a suitable place in the story to expand upon it, although I did have quite a few ideas about why it was there in the first place.

Malin again

"old friend. Onorait Paix know. Happy" – They're talking about David, Pix's copper aging facility!

The lit torch

When Pix takes the unlit torch down from the wall and lights it with the lantern flame, I inwardly cringed as I wrote that scene. An archaeologist effectively setting fire to an ancient artifact?! Well, he's not only an archaeologist; he's also a 2,000-year-old man who would have thought nothing of reaching for a torch like that in his past. Instinct just took over when he needed a better light source to see by.

Chapter 4

Malin's origin and colour

The reason Malin is a ghostly teal is because they're made from the gratitude of all the souls Pix has helped or guided in his lifetime. Since, in Minecraft, everything soul-related (torches, campfires, lanterns, fire) is teal-coloured, that's why Malin is the colour they are. (Plus, y'know, Flower of Laurelin's lovely artwork — their DTiYS of Emdiaart's original 'Pix and ghost cat' — which I used for the Tumblr banners announcing new chapters:



"My name has been" as the start of the words spoken by all those who are dying

This is a nod to Pix's video sign-off: "My name has been Pixlriiffs." Later in the story, the past tense "has been" took on more significance, as the words should only be spoken in the final moments of life and never uttered aloud before then. Since "my name is" might be used as a greeting, the past tense was needed for the final words.

"There is a candle to be lit"

This comes around several times in the story. It's something of a traditional thing for Paixandrians to say after a soul has passed, the totem has been given, and the blessing has been spoken over them.

Paix as a wandering death doula

A doula is traditionally a midwife, taking care of a mother as she ushers a new soul into the world. But there is also the concept of a death doula, who takes care of souls in the weeks and days before they leave the world. [[Source](#)]

Chapter 5

Tango

Paix's introduction to Guildmaster Teng-ahtk (TangoTek) begins with musings of how redstone seemed to be "a confusion of clunks and clicks". This is a fond little nod to Tango's way of talking about "the beeps and the boops" when he gets excited about redstone. Beeps and boops are words too modern for Copper King Paix to be thinking about but clunks and clicks worked nicely as a substitute. And of course, Tango makes redstone fun. He's all about the games, right?

"I never understood those glasses, but boy did you get excited about the boom-booms."

This is a direct reference to [this moment](#) when Tango was building Basalt Assault. Still one of my favourite moments of his entire season 9 series (and that's saying something, since that series included the incredible streams for Decked Out 2).

In the catacombs

In the main room under the Ancient Capital's statue, Pix looks from the copper lightning rods to the iron bars, and back again. Malin says, 'big spark catcher not sky spark catcher' and this is a hint that possibly the copper and iron were used as some kind of electrical transmission device, to power whatever moved the giant tomb that was pushed to one side.

Mumbo

"There is learning to be had in the ridiculous as well as in the art," Maah-em Behro continued. "Building something silly, just for the joy of seeing if it will work, stretching your mind and the dust's abilities to their limits."

All of this is a nod to Mumbo's long-running 'I build your silly Minecraft ideas' YT series. And Mumbo is, of course, the go-to for vault creation, entrances, and complex redstone ciphers, because that man has a weakness for vaults and piston doors!

Exploring the catacombs

Pix makes all the chalk marks on the left-hand wall; a nod to what he does with torches when caving in the Minecraft Survival Guide, with the advice of “Put the torches on the *left* and you’ll find the *right* way back,” (which he says he probably got from Paul Soares Jnr).

The distant rhythm – piston-like but regular like a clock – that allows me to introduce the memory of Etho

I needed a reference to clocks (because of the Etho hopper clock) and this is the only other reference I made to the Machine, because its pistons fired regularly, like a slow clock.

Chapter 6

Croak burp fruit

This one’s obvious and I think everyone picked up on it. Froglights are, of course, created by frogs eating the smallest size of magma cubes and ‘burping out’ the froglight blocks. Since I had the lights growing on trees, that was why Malin referred to them as fruits.

Chapter 7

Why False’s balloon on the Greatbridge was almost completely destroyed

On the Greatbridge, the remnants of False’s balloon are almost totally gone, with only a few very sheltered scraps of wood and wicker remaining. But much later in the story, we have Paix’s books remaining in the castle after two thousand years, albeit in a very tattered state. This is simply because the Greatbridge is open to the elements and above a large body of water (so the air is damp) and Paix’s rooms in the castle are dry and sheltered.

Chapter 8

Continuity error!

Pix thinks ‘a few sketches and photos would have to suffice’. No other mention is ever made of any type of camera, or even a cell phone. In fact, he sketches *everything* after this point. There would be no photos.

Chapter 9

The 'soft well of time' around the sword statue

This is a hint to how – later in the story – Sausage reincarnates. Ser'Zhege is inferred to have died in the maelstrom, but much later in the story N'dachVeip sees a man who, though much younger, is the absolute spitting image of Ser'Zhege. This is hinted at again in this chapter when Pix murmurs, "So you found your way here eventually. Changed, yes, but I think that was a good thing." At this point he doesn't know that Ser'Zhege reincarnated; he just assumes he survived and made his way to the Ancient Capital.

The echo of a small dog yipping

This is Bubbles! (Sausage's adorable little Yorkshire Terrier.)

The contents of the chests and barrels

All of these are accurate to what was in some of the chests and barrels around the sword statue. I re-watched those videos several times so I could take notes.

Chapter 10

FWhip's statue being slightly chaotic and wonky

This is a direct reference to his mentions of 'goblin wonk' in his building style for Season 2. And the lump of gold shoved haphazardly into the statue roughly where its heart would be, of course, represents his character's love for (and hoarding of!) blocks of raw gold.

Fun fact

I almost included the retrieval of Shelby's wand from beneath her Greatbridge tree, so it could go into Pix's museum, but I eventually decided against it.

Chapter 11

G'tehm ah-Shker

"Well, hello there. Welcome to the wonderful world of starlight and ancient travellers."

Honestly, if you didn't recognise this a nod to as Scar's "Well hello there. Welcome to the wonderful world of Hermits and Crafting" Hermitcraft intros then shame on you! xD [Fun fact: Whenever I read this chapter aloud, I say it exactly as he would.]

Chapter 12

Continuity error!

It's unlikely that – no matter how well cultivated an area is – yams would have survived and continued to self-propagate over a 2,000-year timespan. Wild sorghum might, but yams? Nah. Just... shhh. Go along with it ;)

Chapter 13

The blue blanket on the bed

Well, Pix's famous jumper is blue, but his in-game bed in that 'hole in the hill' at the Ancient Capital is also blue. This is unusual for him, as he usually tends to favour the traditional Minecraft red bed. I just carried that across into the story, giving him a blue blanket on both of his beds (in the 'hill room' and in Paix's quarters in the castle) in the Ancient Capital, as well as in Paixandria.

Cringe of the chapter

The Pott sized ledger. God knows why I made it that old Imperial paper size, which certainly wouldn't have been around in the heyday of the Ancient Capital! Maybe it was just a size that Pix was familiar with from his work with historical books?

Chapter 14

The contents of the chest

The blue-hooded robe bordered with gold and red ribbon, as well as the animal leash are, of course, a nod to Pix dressing up as the Wandering Trader early in Season 1. That robe later became one of Paix's travelling cloaks.

The fading banners

At the time of writing this chapter, Pix and ZloyXP were partway through their first co-op Elden Ring playthrough on Twitch and had reached the Altus Plateau. The fading translucent banners as the city sank back into its past were a nod to the banners in that area of the game.



Continuity error!

The worn flint and steel in the chest. This *may* have been used for other things, such as lighting fires or indoor candles, but it was never used for the outdoor candle ceremonies, as by the time Paix had arrived at the Ancient Capital the whole 'liquid light' thing had been in use since the Great Caravan left Paixandria. And, since I had it bundled together with the candles and copper totems in that chest, the inference was that it was used for the candle ceremonies.

Chapter 15

Fun fact

In this chapter I explain how the Vigil originally appeared in Paixandria, rising from beneath the sands. In the chapter where the maelstrom happened, I *almost* had it sinking back beneath the sands taking Paix with it, protected inside its outer wall until the maelstrom had passed, at which point it would rise again. I decided against this for two reasons: 1) I couldn't justify it not filling with the sand that it displaced as it sank down, and 2) It seemed even more infeasible and unrealistic than the Vigil simply protecting Paix with the power of its light and Grace.

Chapter 16

Just WHO was leaving the offerings and washing the clothes, etc?

I never explained this, preferring to leave it as a mystery. I still want to leave this up to the reader. It could have been the magic and power of the city and the statue, or it could have been Mhenheli (or his past self/'ghost').

This is not canon (since even I don't actually know – lol!) but my own fancy is this: The clothes were being washed by Ehzhani, the washerwoman who was the mother of little Q'aliseh. And after she died, another washerwoman took on the duty. And the various offerings – including the desert clothes – were from a combination of the city/statue, the city's people, and Mhenheli's past self/'ghost.' Again, not canon; pick your own preferred reason for this!

The incense, though? That was Mhenheli 😊

“I was both there and not there...” Pix said slowly, “until I was observed.”

Yes, it took Malin the cat to remind him of that fact. An obvious sidelong smirk at the Schrödinger's Cat thought experiment.

Continuity error no.1!

In this chapter I mention that the touching of fingertips to forehead was the gesture 'given by his people to a leader of men.' I later revised this to be a general Paixandrian gesture of greeting and respect, which – when accompanied by a low bow – was a gesture of *deep* respect.

Continuity error no.2!

The stone surround for the door into the hill in the Ancient Capital is a 'thick and elaborately carved polished grey stone architrave' but much later in the story I mention Paix's tent being surrounded by a protective sandstone structure, which is the actual origin of the 'room in the hill.' So that door surround should have been sandstone, like the inside of the room.

Chapter 17

Nehle-aalh

Lovely old Nehle-aalh was, as I mentioned in the comments, 'a cross between a doting grandma, a confidante, and an elderly aunt with a naughty sense of humour'. And she had more than a touch of Juliet's Nurse in her, as played by the ineffable Miriam Margolyes in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.

“She calls to you, doesn't she?”

Here is the first mention of that phrase, which comes back several times in the story. 'She' is the Vigil. But a fun little fact here is that, in this very first mention, I was considering the possibility of 'she' being the statue of the Ancient Capital. I

later ditched this idea, purely because it would have muddled the already confusing timelines even further!

Chapter 18

Continuity error!

Just a tiny error here. Originally, the language spoken by Pearl's people was called 'Helianthian'. Later in the story I called it 'Helianthan'. Since the latter is easier to say, that'll be the canon name for it, although the official name of the empire in the story is still Helianthia (even if everyone refers to it as The Gilded Lands).

The feeling of 'the warm pressure of a palm on his forehead, like that of a mother comforting her sick child' after Pix whispers his apology for causing Pearl's withering

Yes, it was the statue comforting him. She is, after all, a representation of Pearl, depicted as a maternal goddess.

Chapter 19

No notes for this one. I was simply aiming for a very sensory chapter, filled with grounding, comfort, and home. Although do read the end notes on this chapter, as I only heard Pix's words about the music I was listening to *after* I'd written the chapter. And he'd felt the exact same way about it as I did.

Chapter 20

Again, no notes on this one. I just loved the idea that David 1.0 was Paix's sort of 'end of term project/assignment' for becoming a member of the Redstone Adepts.

Chapter 21

The changing of the room in the hillside

The constant small changes to the room are the doing of the statue/city. I use those two words interchangeably, as to me they're one and the same thing. The statue is the guardian of the city, and she is its heart. This is why she sometimes responds to Pix with signs such as shooting stars and the 'God rays' that travel down her outstretched arm at sunrise and sunset.

What makes a candle shine bright

Pix explains to little Q'aliseh that one of the things that will make a candle shine bright is "a life spent helping or guiding." Yep, that's a reference to the Minecraft Survival Guide!

Timeline/Name point to note – something of a continuity issue

At this part of the story, we hadn't visited Paixandria. I was using 'Pix' for present-day Pix walking in the Ancient Capital's present, and 'Paix' when he walked in its past. The first time we touch on that use of 'Paix' is in this chapter, and I rather wish I'd not done it now, as it became too confusing to continue doing once the Great Caravan had arrived at the savannah and the Ancient Capital began to be built. My original reasoning was that in those early moments in the city's past he was more 'in touch' with his old Copper King self. This is one thing that I didn't correct in the PDF download, but I did want to make a note of it here.

Pix's/Paix's wings of 'age-yellowed bone and shattered ancient gauzy membranes'

Even though I didn't include any of the Phantom Assassin lore in the story, I wanted to give a small nod to him, so I made these wings be phantom-like.

The void

In this chapter I was already laying the foundation for the explanation of Pix's canon line, "I'm tired of dying in the void" in Season 1, Ep 19, right before the dragon fight.

Chapter 22

The reflection in the mirror

Did you read the story right to the final chapter? If so, then you'll know who I mean when I tell you that the reflection Pix saw in the copper hand mirror – the reflection whose eyes cast down for a moment and then looked back at him, haunted and pained – was the version of him known as 'sorrow and guilt'.

The rope of beads

This lovely long rope of what are, essentially, the Paixandrian equivalent of worry beads, once belonged to Mhenheli. We see Paix discover them in the chest of Mhenheli's personal belongings at the end of chapter 70. We don't find out until then that this is why Pix feels so calmed and comforted and able to tap into his serene old Copper King self when he uses them.

The Paixandrian symbol for 'trust'

I used [this beautiful artwork by iPaxxon](#) as the inspiration for the symbol used throughout the story to denote 'trust'.

The funeral

This is probably obvious, but the funeral in this scene is that of Ehzhani the washerwoman, and the little boy taking part in the funeral (and waving adorably to Pix) is little Q'aliseh.

Who was the meat pie seller on the Greatbridge?

So many suspicious eyes at the mention of this one – lol! In the comments I said I'd leave his identity up to the reader, but canonically in the story? Yep, he was indeed the reincarnation of the Sausage that is Mythical.

Chapter 23

He was yearning again

The first hints that Pix is feeling a pull backwards in time. He dismisses it as a wistful yearning to be back in his beloved Paixandria again, but this is where I started to lay the groundwork for his first timeline split; the point where a version of him began to walk back in time.

He draws closer. He is coming

And here's more groundwork-laying. Every time you see 'He is coming' throughout the story, it could refer to a different 'He'. Sometimes it's his future self, arriving for the self that was walking back in time. Sometimes it's his past self or selves, arriving for his present self. And, just once, it's Mhenheli.

The thing moving quickly in the shadows when he goes to visit David again

As the lights go on in the room that contains David, *'something caught his eye in the far corner, where it was still dark; something moving quickly in the shadows. As the light finally reached that corner, he looked more closely but saw nothing. Probably just a bat, or his own eyes playing tricks on him.'*

That was no bat. It was the version of him that had walked back in time and was watching his 'future self' discover and explore the city, the version who called him 'Emiah'. He was trying to hide as quickly as he could, but Pix caught just a momentary movement of him ducking down. (And, of course, he's an ethereal version of Pix, so he's not fully solid and recognisable as a person moving around.)

Continuity error!

At the end of this chapter, as we're in the past with Paix reading Ser'Zhege's letter, he orders Mhenheli to "Ready my armour". Well, uh, maybe if he'd actually been *wearing* armour then he wouldn't have been so badly wounded in the battle that followed. *cough* Oops?

Chapter 24

Dragon fight! Lots of notes for this one.

Malin guarding Pix

Here is the first hint that Malin isn't only a companion; they are also Pix's guardian. Something that I never explained but had wondered if anyone would catch on to (nobody mentioned it, so it was probably too subtle – lol!) was that Malin, the Vigil, and the statue/city were all kind of in cahoots. Think about it: Malin lived in all the timelines. They were always with Pix in some form or other (the mote, the moth, the bird, the cat) no matter which timeline he was in. Malin *knew everything*, but it was down to Pix to work his way through it all and learn to forgive himself. Malin was just there as guardian and moral support/comfort.

The Eternal

The one title that Pix never knew about or claimed. While Malin addressed him directly as 'Onorait Paix', to them he was the Eternal.

The insectile creatures

Silverfish, of course. In the story I tried to show that they were made of the same stone that they nest in; hence they shatter against the walls when attacked.

Fun fact

It was a small stone chip from a shattered silverfish that N'dachVeip winkled out of his boot heel with the point of his sword.

The skirts of Paix's coat stirring in an unseen breeze

Any time you see Paix in the Land Beyond Death (the End) through somebody else's eyes, I usually try to mention that either the skirts of his ivory coat or the ribbons on his wings are stirred gently as if by a soft breeze, even though there is no wind in the Land Beyond Death. This is actually the Vigil watching over Paix.

The friendly bickering between N'dachVeip and Caelamondorion

Yep. 100% Legolas and Gimli vibes right there. I'm owning it! xD

The black shards

In the story, I wanted to differentiate this from the canon dragon fight, so – rather than purple dragon’s breath – I came up with the black shards as something deadly that the dark elemental hurls down at the hunting party. That also gave me the single shard that would be thrown into the Forge of Rachzem and cause the maelstrom.

“I’m tired of dying in the void”

And there we have it. Paix has visited the Land Beyond Death hundreds of times at this point, and because the dark elemental guards the only safe/painless way home, his only way back is to fall into the void, which I’ve already described as an awful thing to endure. Now he has the chance, finally, to clear the way, as it were, which is why he’s so determined to see the fight through to the bitter end.

The golden orb above Paix’s head in the final moments of the fight

Remember the Vigil is watching over him (the gently moving coat skirts)? That orb is her Conduit, coming to him in his moment of dire need, to supplement his fading strength enough that he can strike the killing blow.

Chapter 25

So, did it hurt when the elemental shattered Paix’s wings?

The answer is no, because those wings are phantom wings, and are effectively dead. Much the same way that cutting your nails or hair doesn’t hurt, so damage to Paix’s wings didn’t hurt. Their being shattered would be more of a nuisance than anything else, as it would mean they couldn’t support his weight.

What was ‘watching’ Xsia-Minai’Te and Caelamondorion?

The Vigil. If you touch her Keeper, she wants to know you mean him no harm.

Chapter 26

The vision

The vision at the start of this chapter includes ‘fractured glimpses of the Vigil’. This is a callback to the ‘visions’ that Pix had after the dragon fight in Season 1, where broken and flickering images of candles and the Vigil appeared on-screen.

The black shard in Paix's hand

I explained this in more detail in the comments. Paix's agonised wish that he'd kept the shard embedded in his hand so it couldn't wreak the destruction of the maelstrom, and Malin's subsequent gentle mind-nudge that Paix wasn't strong enough to resist it and would instead have become the guardian himself are both vaguely inspired by the mirror shards that embedded into Kai's eye and heart in the fairy tale *The Snow Queen*. In that story, the shard corrupted Kai so that everything he saw was ugly and he became cold and withdrawn. A similar thing would have happened to Paix if Xsia-Minai'Te hadn't removed the black shard from his hand.

The dark and silent Vigil

This is a nightmare, a lingering vision from the black shard. Its intent is to give an idea of the kind of torment that Paix would have suffered had the shard remained within his hand.

Chapter 27

Why did the Vigil scream?

The torment that Paix endured as the Vigil mourned the thousands who died as the maelstrom approached Paixandria was because he had used – for his own selfish reasons – the gifts that she had given him. His wings are intended only to help him carry souls across the void, not to aid him in destroying any living creature; even one as dark as the elemental guardian in the Land Beyond Death.

This is crucial to understand. His original guilt and torment were indeed because it was his fault – *in this timeline*. While the elemental would have been destroyed anyway (and was, in the alternate timeline) it was his selfish actions, using the gifts that the Vigil had blessed him with, that caused its end in this original timeline. The Vigil was mourning his *failure*.

Chapter 28

No notes for this one. Pix is beginning to let go of his need to understand what's happening to him and around him. He's built a high wall of self-control around himself over the centuries, but he's learning to let it crumble and allow the strangeness around him to wash over him.

Chapter 29

Continuity error!

The prayer of *Mabra'Qiza liaah-qun* ('Vigil's Grace grant it so') changes throughout the story. This is one of the inconsistencies that came about because I was winging it with the conlang and not keeping notes! In the chapter where Caelamondorion asks the Vigil to show Paix's wings, he translates *Mabra'Qiza* as 'Blessed Vigil', whereas here it means 'Vigil's Grace'. And elsewhere the prayer is *Maah'Qiza liaah-qun*. However, in many other places in the story I've given *Maah'* as meaning 'my' (e.g., *Maah'maru* = 'my little one', or *Maah'qab* = 'my heart').

The contents of Crag's dropper

These are as close as I could get them to the actual contents of that dropper in-game. The only difference was the quantity of froglights in the shulker.

The name of Paix's trident

The trident is named *Yah'dir-siqq*, which in Paixandrian means 'bringer of lightning'. This is a reference to the name that Pix gave to his trident in Empires Season 1: 'stormbringer'.

Chapter 30

Timeline note

This is something of a crucial chapter, as it's the moment when present day Pix had 'walked back' far enough to change the past. The first scene is intended to be a blending of past and present, with Pix feeling more and more at home wearing desert raiment while working around the ruins. This is also reflected in his handwriting being tight and 'scribble-scrabble' during the day when penning his field notes but opening up into a flowing and elegant script at night while transcribing into his ledgers. He also starts penning occasional lines of poetry, as he once did many years ago. Remember the times when the story said, 'He was becoming again'? He was becoming his old self.

The changing of history

This scene is identical to how it originally played out, except for Paix's slow, puzzled realisation that this has happened before and that he can change history. **HOWEVER!** In this moment, he's not only Paix the Copper King; he's also the 'walked back in time' Pix. I tried to show this in his thoughts that *this time* he has agency. His original self would have had no idea – at that point – of what would transpire,

of the destruction that would come. But his future self knew and was unconsciously influencing Paix.

This was difficult to write, and I'm not sure it came across all that well – especially since my readers had no clue at that time about the different timeline versions. I was trying to oscillate between Paix being puzzled at having this strange awareness that he'd altered history, and Pix's relief that he'd managed to give his past self a second chance.

Chapter 31

The ledger's true purpose revealing itself

Slowly filling with snippets of poetry, as the language that he writes in moves seamlessly from English to Paixandrian without him even noticing, he's 'becoming' even more. His old self, bleeding through in his every action.

In the first scene I'm still blending past and present, switching from present day Pix becoming his old self, to King of A'lumiya Paix, discussing the new copper aging facility with his engineers. While this scene probably reads as very confusing, that's literally all I was trying to get across: the blending of timelines, touching across the ages.

He is here

More blending of timelines! At this point I need to explain that – as you've probably realised – time is a VERY slippery thing in the Ancient Capital, and it's most slippery of all for the 'walking back in time' version of Pix. All I can suggest to you as a visualisation for his movement is to imagine him almost glitching back and forth through time. So, while in the previous chapter, he had reached the moment of changing history regarding the Elemental fight, in this chapter he's watching himself in the form of present-day Pix as he arrives in the Ancient Capital on that first afternoon. But in his own mind at this point he's still closer to his present-day self than he is to his ancient self.

Scattering the redstone dust

I'm not sure how many people spotted this at the time but given the confusion over who the mysterious arrival was, I suspect nobody did! When Pix scatters the redstone dust at the base of the statue that was a huge clue as to who was arriving! Because, when Pix finds the statue for the first time at the very start of the story, what does he have to do? He has to mend the broken redstone line that

activates the door of the catacombs! That redstone line had *just* been broken by his future, 'walking back in time' self!

Is your head hurting yet? Imagine mine, as I was trying to keep all this straight xD

Chapter 32

Emiah

Paixandrian for 'brother'. As 'walking back in time' Pix watches himself arrive in the city, he sees the ring on his finger. He recognises that ring as that of the Copper King, but he cannot countenance what it must mean: that this is himself.

So, who was Malin being affectionate to?

Well, it was a tall man whom Pix couldn't see; some invisible shadow of the past who nonetheless could apparently see future Malin and who had crouched down to pet them. Malin gives you a big clue when Pix asks them about their 'new friend'...

not new friend. old friend. dear friend.

Of course, it was Mhenheli.

Chapter 33

Fun fact

The regalia cloak was partly inspired by [this beautiful old leather cloak](#) in the V&A's collection. Though the regalia cloak is far lighter, being made of layered ivory coloured silk, I adored the embroidery on that leather cloak and used it as inspiration for the embroidery on the regalia cloak.

Chapter 34

The copper crown's protection

The source of the copper crown is a closely guarded secret, passed down from ruler to ruler. It was revealed to Paix's great-grandfather, Paix al-Talamah, soon after the Vigil rose from beneath the sands. One day, he went out to the monument and found the crown sitting upon its outer rim. He picked it up and took it home, but the moment that his wife reached out to touch it, sparks flew from it. This happened when anyone except Paix al-Talamah touched or held it.

No other could even so much as reach for it. Anyone who *did* touch it ended up with strange and painful lightning-shaped burns on their hands and arms.

The fact that Paix al-Talamah was the only person who could touch the crown was one of the reasons – alongside the Conduit and emerald only activating when he put the crown on his head – why the city’s elders elected him leader of the city and agreed that the position could be handed down through his family line. By the second generation – Paix’s grandfather, Paix al-Zhaanti – it was accepted that the city’s leader was also its king, having been chosen by the Vigil to receive the crown and become its Keeper.

Did Mhenheli believe Paix would save himself when the bells sounded?

Nope, hence the silent stand-off between them. He knows his master well, and the fact that Paix wouldn’t look at him as he gave his word was enough to tell Mhenheli that there was no way Paix was going to abandon even one of his people in order to save himself.

Chapter 35

The game of Yah'taqudh

This game, played with cards and small copper coins, is a banking game. It’s basically a simple version of Blackjack; the version known by various names, including [Pontoon](#), Twenty-One, and Vingt-Un. This is a small personal memory from me, since I used to play Twenty-One for pennies with my grandparents when I was a little kid. We’d each have a bag of 100 pennies, and we’d play for hours, just for fun. Nobody ‘won’ the pennies; they just were put back in their bags for another day.

The Red Death

The disease of the Red Death, mentioned in this chapter, is a cross between necrotising fasciitis and a haemorrhagic fever like Ebola. (I suggest not looking either of those up if you’re squeamish.)

Fun fact!

Well, maybe not so fun, if you think about it. In chapter 18 Pix recalls having visited Gilded Helianthia once, “many years ago on the way to a trade meeting with Mythish ambassadors in the time before the red curse took over that place.” Since this was early in the story, I hadn’t yet established whether I was going to even mention the whole blood sheep thing for Ser’Zhege (MythicalSausage) but in the end I decided that the ‘red curse’ was a Paixandrian nickname for the Red Death.

So, Mythland was struck by that terrible disease at one point during Paix's time as King of Paixandria.

The king visiting the mages for a cure for the Red Death

Just a small point of note here, but I wanted to have Menet's tales of the king's visions clearly showing that Paix didn't send ambassadors for such important tasks. He went there himself and was not too proud to *beg* for potions. Using that word was a subtle hint to show Paix's humility when it came to saving his people; that he would do *anything* to help them. Which... makes his eventual fleeing of the city even more of a gut-punch.

Is the king wedded to the Vigil?

Unofficially, yes. There are no ceremonies, it's not public knowledge, and the king can take a wife if he so wishes, but he is tied to the Vigil in more ways than just being her Keeper.

Paix as the third generation to be Vigilkeeper? What about his great-grandfather? Valois, that's a continuity error, right?

Nope! While Paix's great-grandfather was the first leader of the city, it wasn't until his death that the first Vigil ceremony – carried out with his candle – took place, held by Paix's grandfather. So, Paix is indeed the third Vigilkeeper, not the fourth.

Chapter 36

This chapter is seen through 'walked back in time' Pix's eyes, but by now he's so blended with Paix that not even the words (in English) written in 'Emiah's book make sense to him. As a reminder: this version of Pix is a little bit all over the place in the timeline, glitching back and forth. I wish I'd made this more obvious, but it would have been too difficult to do without giving things away!

The only clue I could give was in his thought at the very end: *I cannot remember my future, but... do you remember your past? Do you remember me?* He is the past, and he's living in A'lumiya with everyone else in that past, which is why he also urges 'Emiah' to understand that *I never left. We never left. We are still here. These bones that you see are but shadows. They are not the life of this place. Would that I could show you, brother. Would that these eyes could see what I see.*

As the reader, you only see the truth of that in the finale, when his 'walked back in time self' (AKA 'curiosity and hope') takes Pix there to witness himself on his knees on the Greatbridge.

Chapter 37

I tried to do as much of an exact replay with this as the original Elemental fight. Where I could keep the original dialogue, even if it meant changing the context, I did. Obviously, with a new person taking Paix's place in the fight, that wasn't going to be possible all the time, but I did my best.

The Dreamer observes, through the ever-shifting walls of time

I had in my head that the 'ever-shifting walls' were almost literal; that the scene replayed almost like a theatre production, where the scenery is moved around. For Paix, dreaming this version of the fight that he strangely knows well – even though in this timeline it hasn't yet happened for him – the walls of the stronghold were moving around to reveal the 'players' in the dream as they walked through each corridor and down each set of steps; similar to how an MCYT video might feature jump-cuts and freecam mod footage.

The shattering of the final crystal

In the original fight, Paix used his wings to fly up and hit the final crystal with his trident. In this version, Qazepha (Joey Graceffa) used living jungle vines to climb the outer edge of the obsidian tower and threw golden bolas to destroy the crystal. The inspiration for Joey's base in Empires SI was Mesoamerican, and the Inca army used bolas in battle, so I felt that this would be a fitting weapon for Joey to use.

The black shard landing in N'dachVeip's red scarf

As the Vigil said, once N'dachVeip arrived in the Land Beyond Death, "You were destined to free this place." That black shard was always going to end up in his hand, and that hand was always going to throw the shard in his forge and be behind the eventual destruction caused by the maelstrom. Note that the dialogue between him and Caelamondorion in this chapter is identical to that in the original fight. I just wanted the shard to come to him in that simple way; found nestled amid his beloved old red scarf, the thing most associated with him.

Chapter 38

I'm not sure what I can give you for this one. I was trying to keep my pacing quick in the first scene and the start of the second (before the doors of the Anthill slammed shut behind Q'alamet) because I wanted to hammer home the feeling of desperation and urgency. So, the words and visuals are hitting short and fast

and breathless, not giving the reader a moment to catch their thoughts. I didn't want to draw it out into a longer scene. Those people had so little time to get to safety, so – as a reader – you have the same short and breathless sprint to safety with them.

And then... we're with Mhenheli. Brief, desperate hope, and then the slow, crushing grief that consumes him. He knew – as we're aware – all along that Paix would not abandon his people, but as we see in the next chapter, he has lost more than just his master and king.

The king's final words

A couple of points to note in Paix's final letter to Mhenheli:

First, his request to be buried as a man and not as a king, if his body is found. He also says that if his body is *not* found then he is 'one with the sands from whence I came,' which is a reference to the blessing that he speaks over the dead (which includes the words 'the sands cradle you'). His acceptance of death ('I shall be at peace') is commonplace among his people.

Second: 'The Vigil is Love'. This is the first mention of that phrase, which is later revealed to have been an old and faded carving on the Vigil. In the chapter where the Vigil speaks to Mhenheli after the maelstrom, we see that this is literal, and as Paix becomes her living embodiment, we also see that he is referred to more and more from other viewpoints as radiating love.

Chapter 39

The curveball chapter, where you finally get to see behind Mhenheli's tight control and near-impenetrable emotional armour. I had so much to try and fit into that first main scene, but this was the 'turn-around' chapter for Mhenheli. In the previous chapter, the words "We got introduced to you as a bastard and now I love you," were written in one of the comments, and in this first scene we get to see an intimate glimpse behind the scenes of Paix's life – the first time we're aware of these little moments – and we understand the grief of the man who was there for all of them.

Here is where I begin to insert some things that I make callbacks to later in the story, such as: 'Duty. Duty was his everything, and *[this part changed, according to the needs of the scene]*', as well as the tweaking of the cloak so that it fell perfectly.

Here, too, we have the first acknowledgement that both Paix and Mhenheli are aroace, that while Mhenheli loved Paix, it's a deep and pure *platonic* love. And that combines with Mhenheli realising – now that it's too late – that he could have been everything Paix wanted.

Dammit, someone's cutting onions in here again...

The Vigil's in every heart

Menet's speech about the nature of the Vigil not being just a stone monument is something that will probably have hit home for you if you've ever lost someone you've loved. *"The Vigil's in every heart. When we lose someone we love, we light a candle for them and place it at the Vigil itself, but we also carry a flame for them that burns always inside us, until it's our turn to have our candle lit. And so, it goes on."*

That speech is also a nod to a line from *Going Postal* by the late Terry Pratchett: *"Do you not know that a man is not dead while his name is still spoken?"* It's why you'll often see Pratchett fans writing "GNU Terry Pratchett," and why you will discover the Clacks overhead hidden on many a website if you have the plugin for it installed. It's a beautiful, heartwarming tribute to a much-loved author, and you can read more about it [here](#).

If you've ever watched one of Pix's Twitch streams, you'll have probably seen 'GNU Paranor001' in the lower-right corner when his facecam is full-screen. Paranor was one of Pix's moderators who sadly passed away and is remembered with the Clacks overhead directly on stream.

You'll find more than one nod to Pratchett's ideas in this story. If you've never read his work, I highly recommend it.

Vigil Bells

These are little cymbals, very similar to [Tibetan tingsha](#), except each is on its own long ribbon loop rather than joined by a single cord. They are tapped together lightly, in a slow vertical motion, and produce a delicate chime. One woman will walk at the front of any Paixandrian mourning procession, softly ringing Vigil bells. In this chapter, since the people realise that Mhenheli is bearing the king's candle down the inner staircase of the Anthill, this is a mourning procession.



This is also why the women throw off their veils. Paixandrian women are always veiled, but throwing off their usual veil is symbolic, as removal of the everyday veil precedes the donning of the mourning veil, thus it's done instinctively and wildly in the first moments of grief. I also wanted the chiming of their copper jewellery (bracelets jangling as their hands move up to pull off the veils, and earrings also chiming in) to be an additional kind of 'Vigil bells'.

Chapter 40

Menet's golden disc

This is, of course, a Minecraft clock! "A golden disc, half of which was covered by an inset of lapis lazuli to represent the vault of the heavens. Atop the disc, a slender arrow of gold had just begun to rise into the blue, indicating that morning had arrived."

The melted copper

The copper ornamentation around the palace doors, melting in the heat of the maelstrom and filling the cracks in the scorched sandstone ground, is a reference to the Japanese art of kintsugi. From Wikipedia: *Kintsugi* ("golden joinery"), also known as *kintsukuroi* ("golden repair") is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakage with lacquer dusted or mixed with

powdered gold, silver, or platinum. [...] As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.

Paix speaking the words

The idea of Paix whispering to the Vigil all of the words spoken by the dying people he has tended to was inspired by something in a Terry Pratchett novel: the notion that all the spells memorised by a wizard will say themselves when that wizard dies.

Love transcends time and death

The Vigil states that she is Love, and that both Time and Death cannot touch her. This is a direct reference to the quote used at the top of this chapter, from Dr Amelia Brand, in the movie *Interstellar*: “Love is the one thing that we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't understand it.” (Seriously, if you've never seen it, find that scene on YouTube. It's beautiful.)

Grief is love that can no longer be given

This comes from a beautiful quote by Jamie Anderson: *“Grief, I've learned, is really just love. It's all the love you want to give but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go.”*

Chapter 41

His were the hands

This is a callback to chapter 39, where we learned of Mhenheli's true feelings and emotions. ‘His were the hands to...’ are the words I repeatedly used in both chapters to show how devoted he is in serving his master, and how much that ‘quiet masculine intimacy’ means to him.

He wasn't afraid anymore

This closing line was intended to indicate that – having thought he'd lost the most precious thing in his world – Mhenheli realised that he'd never outwardly shown his master just how much he meant to him. We have seen that his movements, though devoted and caring, are quick and neat. Any time he has touched Paix he has always been precise and dutiful, but from this moment you will see a subtle change in those movements. His touch will become more gentle, more tender, more of a caress. And, in the chapter where we're in Paix's point of view as he slowly awakens, we'll see him wonder at that.

Fun fact

In this chapter, we see that – while Paix’s hearing has been temporarily damaged by the noise he endured as the maelstrom raged around him for several hours – he can still hear and be traumatised by the cries of joy from the women of Paixandria. I almost took this a lot further, to give him PTSD with regard to loud noises. I had a scene roughly drafted, where – during his recovery – a thunderstorm rolled over the city, and I planned to use it to give Mhenheli another reason to hold and comfort his master. However, I ended up dropping this whole notion, as it felt a little too ‘poor woobie Paix’ and I instead wanted him to show his inner strength and determination in getting back onto his feet again with the support of his beloved Chaperone.

On the subject of potions

The apothecary gave Mhenheli one potion each of strength, healing, and regeneration. I gave a lot of thought to how I wanted potions to work in the story, since I tried to keep things a little more ‘real world’ wherever possible. To that end, my thoughts on each of those potions ran as follows:

In this world, potions don’t usually confer instant ‘fixes’ for things. In general, I’m taking Minecraft mechanics but trying to make them a little more realistic and less fantastical. Some potions contain more magical elements, but others are more of a ‘home remedy’ that’s been tried and tested over the years. Pretty much all of the beneficial ones have some kind of strong alcohol base, because just the heat and bite of that can help, before the actual ingredients kick in.

A strength potion is one of the ‘home remedy’ types; more of a fortifying concoction, probably with a strong alcohol content (think a really good, aged brandy) and possibly with some kind of natural painkiller infused into it that would allow the drinker to ignore aches and pains if they needed to.

A healing potion has a little magic distilled into it by means of enchantments spoken over the alembics while being brewed, but its base is still more of an overall ‘we threw a bunch of healing herbs into a pot, brewed it up, and over the years we found out that it helped with a lot of ailments’ kind of thing.

A regeneration potion is a truly magical potion, which is why they’re far scarcer, and why the one given to Mhenheli was offered with the exhortation that it should only be used sparingly. It won’t knit together bones, nor will it regrow limbs; its regenerative properties are more restorative, and are kind of a very powerful

blend of strength and healing potion with a little extra mixed in. It will speed up healing, but it's not instantaneous.

Chapter 42

What was Menet thinking when he walked through that door?

Mhenheli was worried about what Menet might think upon seeing him in the king's bed, with the king curled up against him. However, these worries were based on his very recent decision to no longer hide his emotions, and that's not something that Menet would even have considered.

Below is a little more insight into the role of the chief Chaperone in Paixandrian society, which will explain why Menet thought there was nothing unusual in what he saw, save a brief moment of surprise:

A Paixandrian ruler has several Chaperones as they're growing up. Three or four people are chosen – all of the same gender as the young prince or princess – and they serve until such time as one of them is perceived to be more devoted than the others. This particular Chaperone is then given a few additional duties, not limited to caring for their charge, to see if they have the capabilities to take on the role of chief Chaperone, which includes not only being the personal servant to the prince/princess, but also running the entire royal household once their charge ascends to the throne.

The decision is usually made when the Chaperone is in their early twenties, but Mhenheli proved his devotion and aptitude at a much younger age, so he was appointed to the role of chief Chaperone aged just 17.

The role of chief Chaperone is not only that of servant to the monarch. They are the key to the monarch, and their whole world is the monarch. Nobody gets past the Chaperone without damn good reason, as they are fiercely protective of their charge. Not for nothing is Mhenheli feared (and sometimes disliked) by other people who work in the palace! The Chaperone could make life very difficult for anyone who upset their royal charge.

On a personal level, the Chaperone is both advisor and devoted servant. They see every aspect of the monarch, whose implicit trust in them is something the Chaperone would never take for granted (hence the long training they undertake). Their role is an intimate and personal one, in which they see to the monarch's every need and attend them in everything, from dressing to bathing,

from ordering and serving food to ensuring they get enough sleep and caring for them when they are sick. They are both confidante and comfort, and they are permitted to speak their mind if need be. Though a Chaperone rarely avails him or herself of the privilege, they are oftentimes the only person to whom the monarch will listen when hellbent on some ill-advised course of action (and this, in turn, is another reason why the monarch's other advisors and people working at the palace try their utmost to keep on the Chaperone's good side).

In this chapter I wanted to show that Mhenheli has relaxed his tight control after his vow at the end of the previous chapter to no longer allow duty to fetter his heart. However, since this is the first time he's let down his guard with Paix, he is struggling with his emotions by the end of it. Having made that vow, he's trying to find his way in this new world of openness, and he's terrified that he's going to go too far and alienate or upset his master. And he's also terrified that somebody will notice the change in him and wonder what's going on.

Chapter 43

The ocean metaphors

Something of an odd choice for a desert king, right? It was a deliberate choice to depict Paix's slow awakening with metaphors of washing up on a beach (the known comfort of sand) after being tossed by a storm (the maelstrom) and feeling the waters lapping gently against him (the lingering after-effects from the maelstrom - exhaustion and hearing loss - still touching him, but now unable to hurt him).

He was supported. He was held. He was loved.

This is a very personal bit of phrasing for me. A long time ago, I was going through a very stressful situation that caused me a great deal of anxiety, and one particular guided meditation on YouTube was something of a lifeline for me. I would listen to it every evening, and it really helped me. One of the phrases in it is, "You are supported. You are held. You are loved."

Since this is the first time that we're in Paix's head after what he endured in the maelstrom, I wanted this chapter to reflect the comfort that he feels in Mhenheli's arms, and those words - with their old and deep meaning for me - came out as part of that expression.

It no longer hurt to sit in that light

It was Mhenheli's voice and tenderness that engendered Paix's hazy thoughts about the light of the Vigil no longer seeping *into* the cracks within him but instead radiating *out* from those cracks.

This is a threefold thing: 1) Another little sliver of his 'walked back in time self' brushing against him. The 'old and heavy anguish that abraded his soul' is not his own, but his other self's; 2) It's a hint that Mhenheli is what makes Paix feel 'whole' in himself, long before he realises that they are both stars-bound; and 3) It's a foreshadowing of what will happen when Paix becomes the living embodiment of the Vigil, radiating her love and light.

By the end of the chapter, Paix can feel that his and Mhenheli's relationship has deepened and changed. He knows Mhenheli is calling him *maah'qab* ('my heart') and he can feel Mhenheli's love and care, but he's still a little out of it after the terror of the maelstrom, and so it doesn't quite sink in yet. All he knows is that... he is supported, he is held, and he is loved.

Chapter 44

The gifts brought to Paix by his people

I wanted to make these a wide-ranging and eclectic series of little gifts, because there were tens of people lining up to bring those gifts, and if you picked that many people at random from anywhere at any time and asked them to bring a thoughtful and comforting small gift, the selection of items would be completely random. In the story, everyone brought something that was special to them, and most of the items were something they had made according to their own skills. The gifts were not as ostentatious as one might expect gifts for a king to be, but they were all things that their givers hoped would offer their beloved ruler a small comfort as he recovered.

Chapter 45

In this chapter I mostly wanted to show Paix's strength and determination (and stubbornness!) to get back on his feet after what he endured alone in the maelstrom for several hours.

I want to address here, too, just why he is still so weak several days after the maelstrom hit. The reader might think, "Well, he was sheltered by the Vigil. Shouldn't he be over it by now?"

The answer to this is twofold:

- 1) The sheer terror of what he endured, for several hours. He was out there while his city was torn apart around him. The ground was shaking, he could feel the vibration of every rock that smashed into the buildings and the ground. He could feel the blazing heat of the fiery wind. And, initially, before his hearing finally (temporarily) died, he could hear everything: the roaring and crashing, the flames and the howling wind. And all he had to protect him from its physical effects was the invisible 'forcefield' around the Vigil.
- 2) The fact that – despite all the above – every ounce of his focus was on speaking the words of every soul whose deathbed he had attended. He assumed that this was his end, that he was about to die at any moment, and so his final gift to his people was to honour their souls and their memory by speaking their words once more, before finally speaking his own.

After all that, he was completely spent. His weakness was mostly sheer exhaustion, and his body and mind needed both rest and care in order to recover. This chapter is where he shows that he's reached a point where he's ready to push past that exhaustion and begin to lead his people again.

The first caresses

This chapter also shows Mhenheli finally relaxing enough and feeling comfortable enough to give in to the instinct to comfort Paix, first by gently stroking his fingers down the nape of Paix's neck, and then by cupping a palm to Paix's cheek while he expresses his happiness at seeing his master becoming his old self again.

And Paix returns that touch, cradling Mhenheli's cheek and telling him that he is his strength. These are both simple gestures, but they're pivotal in showing how their relationship is beginning to change, both in the sense of being more comfortable with showing affection by touch and also being more open to verbally expressing their feelings.

Chapter 46

Not a great deal of behind-the-scenes stuff for this chapter, especially since it had to be a short one due to RL stuff I'd been dealing with, but I was really happy with how the dialogue turned out for this scene. The actions and dialogue around

Mhenheli making the sha' as he quietly questioned his master, the pauses and sounds of writing, the faint hint of challenge as Mhenheli refused to let Paix hedge his way out of answering him. I'm so proud of how this short but crucial little chapter came out.

Chapter 47

The Return of the King...

(Sorry, I couldn't resist - lol!)

One small personal thing in the early part of the chapter. Many years ago, the library in the city I lived in at that time suffered a catastrophic fire, and as a lifelong reader and lover of books and history it was devastating to witness. I still haven't forgotten the footage of that library blazing, palls of black smoke rising into the sky, and so when you read of the tears in the Paixandrian librarians' eyes as they mourn the loss of some of their priceless books, know that those are my own emotions from long ago.

The trilling of the bird

As his people moved away to allow him to walk toward the doors, some swore to each other around the evening campfires that night that they had heard the joyful melody of a desert bird trilling briefly around the cavern.

This line comes directly after Paix descends from his rooms down to the floor of the Anthill, and is surrounded by his people, who greet him and express their heartfelt gratitude to him for saving them from the maelstrom.

And you know what gratitude toward Paix does, right? Yep. That trilling little bird is the moment that Mischief the little soul companion moth became Melody the little soul companion bird :)

Paix seeing the ruination of his beloved city

I prefaced this scene with the beauty of Paixandria on a typical day. The blue sky and wispy clouds would usually promise a fresh and lovely morning. But then we are met with the gut punch of Paix seeing his city in ruins, and somehow finding the strength to endure it alone. I wanted to juxtapose what we know the city had always been with the distressing truth of what it now is.

Sitting quietly with the pain

Paix opened his eyes, taking in the devastation and letting the anguish of it flow into him, allowing it to settle around his heart. Later, he would sit quietly with the pain of it, watching it and learning how to go on with it buried deep within him.

This stems from a beautiful meditation talk by Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. Sitting quietly with something (a feeling, a thought, memories of a situation, etc.) that makes you uncomfortable or causes you pain or anguish was something that really struck me when I listened to that talk, and so I incorporated it into this scene.

Nothing is ever truly lost

You might have noticed this refrain popping up again and again throughout the second part of the story. It was first spoken by the Vigil, to Paix, as he knelt before her amid the devastation of the city and learned that he and his people would have to return to their nomadic roots.

You might have noticed it being repeated, but did you recognise it? It's from Pix's Empires Season 2 Finale monologue:

In a long-lost age before records truly began, our world was built by Titans (or so it is said). The lands they created became home to people who would seek to emulate and even to surpass that act of creation, and that would eventually bring about their destruction. But destruction is simply part of a cycle. Nothing is ever truly lost.

Look at where it is in the monologue. Look at the sentence that precedes it. That's why you see it so often in the second part of the story, and that's why it was introduced here amid the destruction of Paix's beloved city.

Chapter 48

The uneven steps leading up to the castle

This is a real thing that was done in past times. Many medieval castles were built with 'stumble steps' (also known as 'trip steps') that had varying rise heights and/or tread depths that would wrongfoot attackers, either sending them tumbling over or forcing them to move more carefully to avoid falling, thereby slowing them down and making them easier to pick off from the castle's ramparts and towers.



The strange 'rust red' of the portcullis, and a sidebar about the Nether

In-game, the portcullis was made of Nether brick fences, which is why Pix – on touching it – could sense the “chaos of fire and hellish heat” that told him the metal was “tempered, somehow, within the deepest places of the earth.”

In the story's world, the Nether isn't another dimension; it's deep within the caverns of the world. It's time for a sidebar about the Nether, as I envision it for the world of These Stones Remember, so here are my brief notes about it, which need to be prefaced with a few words about magic:

My thought process for the world itself is 'alternate timeline where a form of natural magic exists but not everyone is aware of it'. Much of what has happened in our world has also happened in the story world, but there's a lot more going on beneath the surface, as it were.

What do I mean by 'natural magic'?

There is a mystical (almost spiritual, but not in a classically religious sense) power to the Earth itself, and certain races are aware of it, but they keep it a closely-held secret, feeling that they are 'guardians' of it. These races include all of the Empires, but some Empires – especially those in more remote/difficult locations where a deep knowledge of their surroundings is essential for survival – are much closer to this mystical power than others (Paixandrians being one of them), and some people within those races are usually chosen as leaders because of their innate affinity with this power (these being the Emperors, of course).

With the above in mind, this is where the more Minecraft-y things can be understood: things such as enchantments, soul sand, and skeletal archers, etc. The Nether is literally the deepest, darkest places of the world. It's not exactly accessed through an actual portal as it is in Minecraft, but it can be discovered in deep caves. The way to get to it is through liminal areas of the underground; areas where the veil between worlds is thinner than most. Again, only those with a sense for these places will be able to spot them and use them to go much, much deeper than others can. 'Ordinary folk' will just see another wall of the cave or tunnel they're in, and – even if they dig through that section – they won't suddenly find themselves in the Nether; instead, they will just have opened up the liminal access point so those who *can* see it could just walk right through and into the Nether.

And Pix finally catches a glimpse of Mhenheli

The castle comes alive around Pix as he wanders through its ruins, but unlike the previous times the city has come alive to him, he seems to be walking in a space or dimension between times, as nobody from the city's past sees him.

That is, until he sees that brief glimpse of black robes, and all thought of anything else is lost as he stumbles after that vision, and finally sees Mhenheli... *and Mhenheli sees him.*

That is not going to make any sense until you reach the end of the story and realise that Pix/Paix and Mhenheli can be together at any time and at any place... including the future. I'm probably about to bend your brain a little, but by the time Mhenheli returns to Paix in the epilogue – in the form of Maxwell – we have already seen Paix moving effortlessly through time to be with Mhenheli and with Nehle-aalh, and in that strange 'there but not there' space he inhabits – half in the world and half out of it – those around him just accept that he is there.

Shh. It's magic ;)

Chapter 49

Malin remembers "black cloth friend"

Well, of course they do, but the reader doesn't know why this is until they reach Chapter 70, when Melody the bird becomes Malin the cat. In the initial timeline, Malin came to be after Paix's many years of wandering the desert after leaving his people to their fate. In the second timeline - after Pix had 'walked back in time' to give himself a second chance, Malin came to be when Mhenheli died.

So yes, as Mhenheli promised on his deathbed, a part of him walked with Paix wherever he went.

Malin is one of only three presences in this story (the others being the city/statue and the Vigil) who knows all along what's going on with all the timelines. They have been there with Pix/Paix throughout each timeline, and they know everything.

The letter to Mhenheli

Oh, I loved writing this letter. (I loved writing all of the letters and journals in this story, to be honest.) Allowing Pix to pour out his emotions and his regrets, to finally tell Mhenheli how much he'd meant to him and how much he missed him, and to finally admit that - had he not been so terrified of losing his beloved Chaperone - he would have offered him his heart, and (as we later learned that - in A'lumiya - Mhenheli was, in all but name) asked him to be his platonic loving companion and Royal Consort.

The 'ghost of Mhenheli'

As you know from reading the whole story, the ghost of Mhenheli who then read that letter wasn't a ghost at all, but the past version of Mhenheli who had made his way to Paix's tent, to check on his master and make sure that all was well, since Paix had clearly stayed late in the city that night. And, in the shifting of times between past and present, with the veil between the two times being almost at its thinnest point, Mhenheli briefly walked in the present, reading his master's journal (as he so often had in the past!) Which is why, when Pix finally spent that day in the past with him, Mhenheli admitted that he already knew how much he meant to Paix.

Chapter 50

Preparations for leaving Paixandria, and we get to meet Paix's camel, Ahet al-Haad Tarida'nal (*She Who Chases the Stars*), whom I absolutely *adored* writing about; she became such a fun character for me! The fastest of all the camels in the city, she was playful (nibbling Paix's hair was her way of showing affection to him) and he loved her dearly. I'm very fond of all the camel lore that I put into this story. As such long-lived animals, they were truly part of their owner's family and were much loved.

Paix becomes the Vigil

In this scene we only see what his people saw, as the Vigil speaks to them through Paix, and she tells them that he is now their Vigil. And, you might have missed it, but she also tells them that Paix is now immortal: ***Undying, your king is now your Vigil, and my light will shine through him.***

Only later do we see, through Xsia-Minai'Te and the sight stone, what happened after his people left Paix and the Vigil alone together: the moment when the Vigil's light moved from shining *on* Paix to shining *from* him.

Chapter 51

The deep crack in the lands on the border between Mythland and the swamp

While in the story this refers to a crack caused by the maelstrom, it's actually a nod to the huge ravine that was exploded between Sausage's and Jimmy's bases in Empires SI.

The blue mist

These are the souls of all those who perished in Mythland and Helianthia, all streaming toward the candles that Paix lit for their relevant empires. And yes, the occasional 'much smaller' wisps that followed one or two larger wisps are the souls of children.

Chapter 52

The end of the Mythish King

Yes, Ser'Zhege died in the maelstrom while making offerings at the Offering Circle. This is the first of only two *inferred* canon deaths, the other being that of Xsia-Minai'Te, who we last see in the final stages of her crystallisation.

The first embrace

Paix might have been laughing softly at Mhenheli chiding him like he was a little boy, but he knew how worried his Chaperone was, hence first the gentle stroking of his neck, followed by that close embrace. And, if you're paying attention, you will notice something about this embrace: Paix draws Mhenheli's cheek against his. This is something we only see three times in the story: 1) at this point; 2) when he holds N'dachVeip at the foot of the ruins of Eastvale; and 3) when he embraces his present-day self in the finale. The way that I intended this is that it's the embrace of the Vigil: quiet and still and comforting; an embrace of pure love.

Chapter 53

A glimpse into nomadic Paixandrian life

The first part of this chapter gives a little glimpse into nomadic Paixandrian life, with the kitchen and supply tents, the bedrolls, and the fact that Mhenheli sometimes makes his master's sha' in the kitchen tent rather than in their own tent.

It also has a lovely little teasing moment between the two of them, with Paix bidding Mhenheli good morning, while yawning and stretching, and Mhenheli returning the greeting with an affectionate, "Morning, sleepyhead", to which Paix responds with a smile. Here, I'm trying to show how easily and effortlessly they've slipped into their new, comfortable ways of being around each other.

The ruin of Eastvale and the rescue of N'dachVeip

The utter devastation of Eastvale had to reflect the fact that it was ground zero for the maelstrom. In particular, the epicentre of it all, at the forge: *split apart like a burst pomegranate. Its massive stone walls lay in heaped chunks all around it, some having been blasted down onto the plains below. The metal parts of it twisted agonised arms toward the skies in a jagged embrace.* We saw in Paix's vision what happened: the pressure rising, the forge breaking apart, the panicked stampede of citizens, the massive explosion and the burst of blinding, pure white

light. Now we see the aftermath, and – tragically – there isn't much left of this once prosperous place. The Rachzem people were almost completely wiped out.

Somehow, against all the odds, starving and weak, N'dachVeip was found alive. But, before I get into that part, we need to consider just *how* he survived, since he was running away like everyone else was. So how did he escape?

I spent a lot of time in the Empires Season 1 world download, camming around fWhip's base, trying to figure out a way that he could have somehow been saved from the massive blast. And, finally, I came up with it. Far below the path that leads out from the forge, there's a small pond at the base of the cliff atop which the Forge is built. So, in the seconds where N'dachVeip desperately tried to keep clear of getting crushed in the stampede, he found himself on the very edge of that clifftop, looked down, saw water that could catch his fall... and he jumped.



Now think back to the fight with the dark elemental:

"This is probably not a good time to mention that I hate heights," N'dachVeip gritted as he inched nervously along the narrow bridge, "but I hate heights."

For him to have jumped down from that cliff, despite his fear of heights, indicates his sheer terror over what was happening.

And then, he is saved by his old friend. Paix's visions of the red candle flickering in and out of his mind's eye shows just how close to death N'dachVeip was, as much from lack of hope as from starvation and thirst. Despite that, N'dachVeip still had the strength to wield a bow, in one final grasp at potentially getting a meal when he saw 'animal legs' (Paix's camel) walking past the cave he'd been sheltering in, alone...

He was alone, for a long time, with the weight of what had happened at his hand. And then along comes a hug – an embrace of pure love from the living embodiment of the Vigil – that saves him.

I'm not crying. *You're* crying.

Chapter 54

The Rachzem horsemen

I needed there to be a very small handful of survivors from the Rachzem people – mostly to ensure the survival of their race as the story moved forward – but the sheer devastation of Eastvale meant there would literally only be a tiny number that could be rescued from the city itself. So, I opted to have the Rachzem horsemen arrive on the scene – possibly having returned from a hunting or trading trip, where they were distant enough from the maelstrom that they had no knowledge of it. Hence their dismay at what they returned to, and their rage upon finding Paix alive and well amid the devastation.

Paix channelling the storm

Through the entire story, we only really see Paix channelling lightning through his trident, which is even named for it. We see it during the fight with the dark elemental, and also when he and the Vigil call down the storm to cleanse the ruins of Paixandria. But here we see that he is able to channel the storm through himself. I never went into detail about this in the story, but canonically this all links in with the copper crown, and how it punishes with painful lightning burns anyone who tries to touch it, other than the king.

Chapter 55

The desert flowers

The delicate pink desert flowers, mentioned throughout the second part of the story, are symbols of both life and death for Paixandrians. They appear after rare rainfall in the desert, and they also provide the dye for Paixandrian mourning raiment, which is a soft, dusky pink. These little blossoms are hardy and much-loved by the desert people, cultivated in many homes, and in this scene, we see a memory of Paix and his father, when Paix was a little boy.

The rainstorm in the desert also shows a side to Mhenheli that – at the time – probably delighted little Paix. Seeing his stern Chaperone completely ignoring (as Paix himself was) Nehle-aalh's urging to come in out of the rain, and instead enjoying the downpour himself was very likely the turning point where little Paix started to actually like Mhenheli.

N'dachVeip's 'hearing aid'

The strange copper contraption that Pix sees N'dachVeip wearing in this scene is – as alluded to in his thoughts – inspired by bone-conducting headphones. Later on, we'll see how N'dachVeip chanced upon the idea for them, as he was leaning on one of the redstone farms he was fixing and could *hear* the machine running; the sound conducted through the bones of his arm into his skull.

The tree behind the throne

The carved tree behind the throne was, as you might have guessed, a summary of Empires Season 1 as a whole. Each branch represented a single empire:

- one gilded [Gilded Helianthia]
- one frosted [Rivendell]
- one speckled with fungi [the Undergrove]
- one limned with copper [Pixandria]
- one bright as a parrot's wing [the Lost Empire]
- one dark as the night and edged with iron [Mythland]
- one red and sparking [the Grimlands]
- one blooming with a multitude of tiny flowers [the Overgrown]
- one glittering with amethyst [Crystal Cliffs]
- one ocean-iridescent [the Ocean Empire]
- one of wood overlain with faint shimmering scales [the Codlands]
- one a myriad of bright layers of hardened clay [Mezalea]

Mhenheli's smile

We are seeing Mhenheli through present-day Pix's eyes here. He *never* saw Mhenheli smile, or even show a hint of it, which is why – amid all the other emotions that are buffeting him in this chapter – he's so stunned by it.

Chapter 56

For all that this is such a crucial chapter, there isn't much behind-the-scenes information to give you about it. However, there *is* one little easter egg tucked away at the end of the second scene...

For old times' sake

Mhenheli tells Pix that – while he was sleeping – a message arrived from N'dachVeip, to the tune of: *"He wanted to ask you for permission to use black powder to excavate the foundations of his new home. Said he was tired of digging and thought he would ask, because he thought that – for old times' sake – you might agree."*

Black powder is an archaic name for gunpowder, so the mention of "for old times' sake" is a Gunpowder Boys reference.

Nothing is ever truly lost

There it is, again. The Vigil is gently reminding Pix that, while he may wake up after this blissful day, only to find himself once again alone and in the present, he should not give up hope. He won't understand this until the very end, when what he thought was truly lost finally comes back to him.

Chapter 57

The introduction to Hadita

In this chapter we meet Hadita, who will end up as N'dachVeip's wife. Apart from her loving nature, we learn from this chapter that her father was born Deaf. And, given that N'dachVeip's hearing was lost in the Eastvale blast, Hadita's offer to teach him her family's sign language already sets them on a course to being together.

The washing of the feet

It's inescapable that there are a handful of religious metaphors and similarities in this story. A king who leads his people out of the desert, a man who becomes the

earthly embodiment of God (the Vigil), etc. On two or three occasions, while detailing the duties that Mhenheli performs for Paix, we see that washing his feet is one of them. This is a very vague nod to Christ washing the feet of his disciples on the night of the Last Supper, and it's intended to show Mhenheli's devotion to his master, as washing someone's feet has humbling connotations.

But then, he turns it around and becomes the stern Chaperone again, telling Paix that before he can do all those things that merit a 'should' he first needs to eat and rest.

Chapter 58

Esaki

N'dachVeip would never forgive me if I didn't go into some detail about his favourite dessert, which he's introduced to in this chapter xD

Esaki is a cross between Turkish baklava and Iraqi kahi. It's a heavy pastry that's soaked in thickened cream and thinly layered with a sweet custard and drizzled with honey. It's incredibly sweet, so it's only served in very small slices, and Paixandrians consider it a real treat, so it's not something that's commonly made. It's mostly reserved for special occasions, or for tempting the capricious appetite of someone who is sick (and who would therefore probably benefit from getting a bit of sugar in their system).

Chapter 59

What happened to the Elvenkind?

Since this story has no Xoroth, there is no Runeblade end for Caelamondorion. Instead, as Paix and Xsia-Minai'Te surmise, the Elvenkind had foresight of the maelstrom and escaped to another dimension/place/time, leaving no trace of themselves behind.

Chapter 60

Paix's realisation

Paix and Xsia-Minai'Te talk about the elemental fight, and Paix learns – at last – of his 'other self'. While this comes as a shock to him, it's also a slow realisation that, suddenly, so many things that had confused him of late now make sense. Most

notably, this refers to the letter from Ser'Zhege. He now knows that, in the moments of confusion where he could not understand how he *should* have done something, but was not doing it, his path had crossed with that of his other self.

It's also at this point that he realises he finally has someone else who knows about his wings, and that he has become the Vigil. And that knowledge – that he's no longer bearing the weight of this secret alone – is the weight that lifts off him. Is it any wonder that, once the Great Caravan arrives in the savannah, he appoints Xsia-Minai'Te to be his advisor?

Chapter 61

Paix becomes the Vigil

In this chapter we finally see what happened to Paix, both in the immediate aftermath of the maelstrom hitting Paixandria – that the Vigil blazed with light, and he leapt into her safety – and in the aftermath of the final night in the city, where the Vigil told his people that Paix would lead them to a new home. We see, through Xsia-Minai'Te's eyes, the Vigil transfer her light and Grace and Love to Paix.

This is also the point where Vigil ceremonies change. Because Paix is now filled with the Vigil's light, he can perform candle ceremonies by calling her light to him by means of her Conduit.

Chapter 62

Was it not a gift to have loved so much?

Somewhere, in some other time, he had loved and been loved so sweetly, so tenderly that the endurance of that loss had almost torn him apart. And was it not a gift – an honour – to have loved so much that he now had to shoulder the grief of that loss?

When Pix awakens after the day spent in the past with Mhenheli, this crosses his mind. It's a nod to a beautiful line from Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne: *"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."*

Pix's discovery of the Vigil piece in the throne

Just as his 'other life' counterpart discovered what had happened in the elemental fight in Pix's timeline, so now does Pix find out what happened to the

people of Paixandria when the maelstrom hit in the history of his 'other life'. Upon finding the piece of the Vigil embedded in the back of the throne, he receives a rapid series of visions, showing him the life that he never had; the life that brought his other self, and Mhenheli, to the Ancient Capital of A'lumiya.

As a side-note: the piece of the Vigil is the one she gifted to Paix before he and his people left Paixandria. When the throne room was built, Paix set that Vigil piece into the back of the throne himself (since nobody else could touch it) so that she was always 'at his back' and guiding him.

Mhenheli's grave

Present-day Pix is, of course, an archaeologist. While he wouldn't know the colour of Mhenheli's candle, he knows a gravesite when he sees one. And, given where it is (outside Paix's rooms), what it's covered with (tiny pink desert flowers), and that the candle at its head (which he knows is not his own candle colour) is still burning, he understands immediately who is buried beneath it. Together with his new understanding that both his other self and Mhenheli came here, this is why he lays down upon the grave and whispers the words he never got a chance to say to Mhenheli when he was alive.

Chapter 63

The sub-chapter headings for this one are all titles of songs by David Sylvian. This is a personal little acknowledgement from me, to how important that man's music has been throughout my life.

This chapter gives us closure and hope. We see Q'alamet healing from the burns he suffered during the maelstrom, and we see the kitten that he rescued in that final moment, now grown and making a delightful little nuisance of herself. We see Menet's care for Q'alamet, which is reflected later in the story as Menet regards him as the son he never had.

We see N'dachVeip's realisation that he might be able to tinker around and make something to bring back his hearing. We see the blossoming romance between N'dachVeip and Hadita, and – at the end of the chapter – their joyful wedding. We see Xsia-Minai'Te riding a pony called Violet (a nod, of course, to the name she gave to the baby dragon hatched from the dragon egg in Empires SI).

We see wanderers, beggars, and the destitute joining the Great Caravan as it travels (a nod to Pix's Empires Season 2 finale, in which he says, *"Those who*

foresaw the destruction fled before it could bring the walls of their homes down around them. And many who had been downtrodden and overlooked saw it as their chance to find a new life for themselves.”)

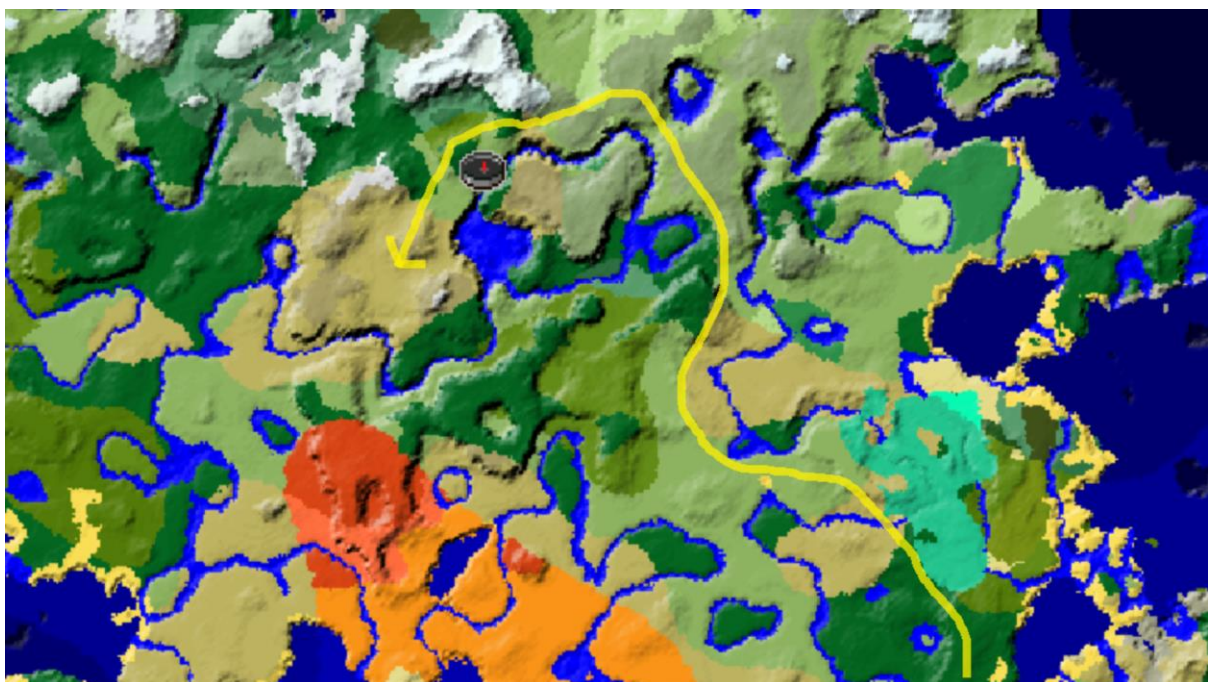
We see the rescued survivors and the people who joined them along the way, all becoming one people, exchanging songs, tales, and recipes (a nod, again, to Pix’s Season 2 finale, in which he says, *“As time passed, and more joined the great caravan, the host became a nation of its own, a glorious congregation sharing one purpose, singing the same resolute song. Though the road was long, they were homeward bound.”)*

Chapter 64

More David Sylvian song titles used as sub-chapter headings, and quite honestly the first scene in this chapter contains my favourite writing from the entire story. The idyllic scene of the plains, the children, the donkeys and the sleepy sheep; I love this chapter with all my heart, and I think that came across in the writing.

The journey

The journey taken by the Great Caravan as it approached the savannah was based as much as possible on the Empires Season 2 map. While I couldn’t include all the biomes on the map, since they wouldn’t make sense in a more realistic setting, it’s possible to trace the route of the caravan if you know the world seed and check a site like Chunkbase.



N'dachVeip's suggestion for a settlement

The tall island that N'dachVeip suggests for the temporary winter settlement of the Great Caravan is actually the island where the Festival of the Rift was held. They had initially approached this island (which, in the story, is much, *much* bigger than it is in-game) from the opposite side to where the Ancient Capital was founded, and eventually travelled all the way around it, before they finally found the savannah.

Does Xsia-Minai'Te know that Paix and Mhenheli are stars-bound?

She has a sight stone, and she knows how to use it. She's also teased both of them several times, because she's a cheeky minx. What d'you think? 😊

Chapter 65

A'lumiya

I spent a long time coming up with the name for the Ancient Capital. As I mentioned in the comments on AO3, the name was a wonderful bit of serendipity, because I wanted to blend Paixandrian (base language = Arabic) with Grym (base language = Russian) and after a *lot* of faffing around, looking up different words, twisting parts of them and smooshing them together, I ended up with A'lumiya. Since I always run names through Google Translate, with 'detect language' enabled (just to make sure it doesn't mean something either offensive or hilarious in another language) I was delighted to see that - in Hausa - A'lumiya translates to 'community'. That's what decided it for me.

Chapter 66

As mentioned in the intro, I wanted to come up with a literary device that would portray a lot of work being shown in a short amount of time, with the intent of it mirroring the incredible amount of castle-building in the timelapse of Pix's finale to Empires Season Two. I decided that excerpts from Paix's journal would mimic a 'timelapse' of the great capital of A'lumiya being built over several years.

Paix sees his future self

The moment when the timelines finally cross. Paix briefly sees the ethereal image of his future self, walking into the 'hole in the hill' where he lives (which is where Paix's tent is in his time). He then enters his tent and, wearied from a long day, gets into bed...

...only to wake up the morning after the day and night Pix spent with Mhenheli. He's in the castle, in his bed, with Mhenheli curled up and sleeping peacefully against him, much to his utter confusion.

He realises, as he watches Mhenheli sleep, that the decision that he feared might mean losing his beloved Chaperone has been taken out of his hands. And, as Mhenheli wakes up, all fear has flown for Paix, as he has what he has longed for right here. At this point, he understands why he has always felt that something was missing from his life, because that's no longer the case. He doesn't as yet know that he and Mhenheli are stars-bound, but we know that when they are together, Paix (and present-day Pix, when he has that one day with Mhenheli) feels 'whole again'.

Chapter 67

Another favourite chapter, wherein I wanted to show Mhenheli's dry sense of humour, as well as give a nod to the fact that he pretty much raised Paix alone. Through the playfulness of N'dachVeip, Hadita, and their mischievous little boy, we get a glimpse of how naughty Paix must have been as a young child, and that Mhenheli is not above subtly teasing him about it.

Chapter 68

This chapter begins with a mirroring of the first time Pix awoke in the past. You'll notice, if you go back and look at that chapter (chapter 14) that – after Paix enters the tent – the words he speaks ("There you are") when he finds his journal are the same ones Pix speaks when he *finds his old self* in the mirror, after he woke wearing his desert raiment and painted kohl around his eyes. The actions outside, with the fallen beer cask that soaks the carter in Pix's time are identical to what happens outside when Paix is retrieving his journal, only this time we've had the build-up to it, and we now know that the beer-soaked red-haired carter whose colleagues are good-naturedly ribbing him is one of N'dachVeip's twin sons.

After this, we begin to move forward in time, in large chunks, long enough that even the Greatbridge is completed. In this chapter, I wanted to show the slow but inevitable aging of the mortal Mhenheli, as seen through the eyes of the immortal Paix.

It begins with Mhenheli forgetting that he'd already ordered the grain delivery, which is a memory lapse that distresses him greatly, as he is always so careful and exact when it comes to running Paix's household. Paix ensures that he doesn't call attention to it when Q'alamet and the head cook are reporting the issue, as he doesn't want to add to that distress, instead asking Mhenheli to make some sha' – a routine task that he's intimately familiar with, and which calms him.

We then move to the stiffness and aching hands of a few years later, and Mhenheli's vow to serve Paix until his last breath leaves his body. We also see the first of the visits to watch the sunrise from the covered balcony outside Paix's rooms. This has been a joy that Mhenheli has indulged in every morning, and it becomes an important part of their relationship together as he grows older and frailer. We see that he now walks with a cane and needs Paix's assistance to climb up a short flight of steps. But his dry humour is still there, since I wanted to acknowledge that people don't suddenly become acquiescent to old age. They're still their same old selves underneath it; they just can't manage to do all the things they used to be able to.

We then see the roles of king and servant reversed, with Paix kneeling at Mhenheli's feet to slip his sandals on, having become carer to his beloved Chaperone. Mhenheli isn't happy with this situation – to him, it's not right that a king should kneel for anyone, let alone a servant! – but he knows that he can no longer do certain things for himself. He's accepted his own physical limitations.

The watching of the sunrise now involves Paix carrying Mhenheli outside to sit him in a chair, drape him in a blanket, and stay with him as they watch together. He knows how much Mhenheli loves this moment, so he'll be damned if he lets his Chaperone miss it.

Eventually, though, we see Paix's emotions poured out into his journal, as they always have been. He knows what is coming, and he dreads it.

Much of this comes from my watching my own ageing loved ones, and seeing over the years how it has affected them. This is a deeply personal chapter to me, as I'm currently living some of Paix's emotions in my own life.

Chapter 69

Fun fact

I'll be honest here, and this is both tragic and funny. Mhenheli's death was going to come in the chapter immediately following the one detailed above... until I realised as I was writing the previous chapter what number the 'death chapter' would be.

Yes, folks. Valois actually wailed at a friend in Discord (and I quote) –

Oh no...

This chapter will be 68

I CAN'T HAVE MHENHELI DIE IN CHAPTER 69!!!

So, yeah. Chapter 69 ended up being a present-day Pix chapter, to save poor Mhenheli from dying in the chapter with the funny number.

Why has Pix not been sleeping well?

Because all of his timelines are drawing together. And, since they're all centred on him, it's disturbing his sleep.

What were the symbols in Mhenheli's accounts book?

Immaculate and precise, each page headed with a date, followed by something he didn't recognise: anywhere between one and seven symbols that were like none he had ever encountered before. Pictograms? Code? They could be either, as he could see that some were repeated elsewhere in the book.

These were symbols that Mhenheli used to record something significant that happened, usually relating to Paix. I never gave much thought to what they might represent but they were clearly important enough that he wanted to record them, and deeply personal enough to him that he used a code to do so because he wanted nobody else to know what they meant.

Page after page of accounts detailing the life of a wealthy household, but then they suddenly stopped. A single page was almost wholly blank, except for nine of the small symbols. The accounts resumed on the following page, but the regularity of dates had altered, as had the content of the columns. They began to list supplies, both stocked and needed, then they listed days of travel and things found. For a while they listed numbers of 'saved', and then they resumed recording days of travel and found things.

The nine symbols represented the days around the maelstrom, starting with the day itself, and including the days when Mhenheli nursed his master back to health and the days immediately after that. When the accounts resumed, they clearly showed the preparations being made to form the caravan to leave Paixandria.

Chapter 70

I still struggle to read this chapter. I still tear up whenever I hear some of the songs I had on repeat while writing it. If it cut you up to read it, it sliced me into many little sobbing pieces as I wrote it. It took me almost three days to get through, and I cried myself into a stuffed-up sinus-y headache that lasted another day or so afterwards.

That's how I knew I had something special.

There's little that I can give you to add to this chapter. It was tenderness, love, reminiscence, and the end of a long, devoted, loving, and loved life. But here are a few things:

Mhenheli's vow

"Maah'qab, if the Vigil's Grace allows it, I will be with you throughout eternity, watching over you. As I walk with the stars, I will walk by your side, and though you may not see me, I will be there, always, in some way."

And he does walk by Paix's side, in Malin. The slipperiness of time in the Ancient Capital meant that this was why Mhenheli was the 'unseen person' whom Pix watched Malin being affectionate to, and it was why 'Maxwell' saw Malin as a real cat in the epilogue. To Mhenheli (both as himself and as 'Maxwell') Malin was completely real, because his own gratitude and love ended up *in* Malin and was what transformed Malin from their desert bird form into their cat form.

The Well of Stars

In this chapter, we finally have the understanding that the Well of Stars is, in fact, the Vigil, just without the spire. It is another part of her – the other *half* of her, if you will.

Within the circle, a deep indigo darkness glittered with the tiny pinpricks of thousands of stars. It reminded him of the ceiling of Paix's bedroom, and he wondered if that was why the ceiling had been painted so.

That is *exactly* why the ceiling had been painted so. Paix and his people navigated by the stars, and he also carried each of his people to the stars at the end of their lives. Not only was the ceiling of Paix's bedroom in Paixandria painted in that way, so was the ceiling of his bedroom in A'lumiya. And, likewise, the ceiling of Pix's small room in the hillside became painted that way (note chapter 26, where this is first mentioned).

Hold in your mind that star-painted ceiling in Pix's room in the hillside as we move toward the end of the story. It's important to remember, when we get to the finale and epilogue, that this painted ceiling represents the Well of Stars...

The tear

Paix sheds a single tear after Mhenheli has walked with the stars, and it falls into the Well of Stars; something he has never allowed to happen before. This tear, frozen in perfect crystal form, becomes Maxwell's earring when we meet him in the epilogue. Mhenheli reached up – unseen – and caught it as it fell toward him in eternity, and it came into his possession in some way through every one of his 18 reincarnated lives until he was finally reunited with Paix. In each of those lives he's only aware of his past once he has the tear in his hand. (This is something I'm considering exploring in a follow-up fic: the 18 times Mhenheli remembered his past.)

The grave

Just a small note here, and that's the pouch of desert sand. It might seem obvious why Paix scooped handfuls of sand from around Paixandria before he and his people left their home. You might think it was a simple memento, to remind him of what he had lost.

It was partly that, but partly because he knew he would one day lose Mhenheli, and he wanted to lay his beloved Chaperone down on a bed of sand from their home when he eventually buried him.

The rain

As Paix finishes burying Mhenheli, he lays down over the grave, and a gentle rain begins to fall. Rain is rare in the savannah, but this rain comes because of Paix's grief. We know he has the ability to control storms, and this is a softer, mournful result of that ability. (Thank you to Jas, whose idea this was. It's such a small thing, but it's incredibly poignant.)

Chapter 71

The journey of grief. From Paix's wild, desperate grief of the previous chapter, we see him skirting the edges of despair and depression, being held up and held back from that only by the constant visits and love of his friends, N'dachVeip and Hadita. Malin, too, in their new kittenish form, offers comfort in Paix's loneliness, and he slowly learns to navigate his grief and live without the one who had been a loving constant in his life since he was a small boy.

Hadita offers to make him a gift, and Paix gives her a set of Mhenheli's old robes, asking her for a small cushion made from them, that he might have something to hold (oh, my heart...) and she promises to bring him something new made from that precious fabric every time she visits him. Once her final gift has been given, and there are only a handful of small scraps of that old fabric remaining, Hadita's offer/promise is fulfilled. It's not a coincidence that she finally passes from life only *after* this.

Chapter 72

The travelling notebook

Pix's field notes book was gifted to him by the city/statue. It's one of the books that he found in the bottom of the chest when the room first appeared for him. Is it any wonder, then, that this notebook moves through time, and is the way he eventually manages to communicate with Paix, his other self?

It went missing from his room, and he eventually found it on the desk in Paix's rooms, in the ruined present day. But, despite it only having been missing for a couple of days, it's covered in dust, as though it had lain there for a long, long time. And – in the next chapter – when we see Paix reading that book in his tent, he remembers seeing it appear one day months ago on his desk in the castle, but he was still lost in grief at that time, and he barely registered it going missing a day or so later.

He is coming (part 1)

This time, it's written three times, each overlaying the other, fainter and then growing stronger. Each time we've seen this, it could refer to one of several people, but this time around it refers to the finale, where 'sorrow and guilt', 'curiosity and hope', and 'the angel' visit him.

The letters

Pix writes a letter to his other self in the field notes book. It's completely spontaneous, but he decides that nothing ventured, nothing gained. And yet, when he awakens the next day, he finds a reply waiting for him...

He is coming (part 2)

Three times again, representing the three visitors mentioned a couple of paragraphs ago. But then, it appears a fourth time... silvered, like starlight.

Remember that starlight, and that the ceiling of that small room in the hill is painted to represent the Well of Stars...

Chapter 73

Paix discovers the letter

This time, it's Paix who gets to read his other self's journal, starting with the letter to himself. And then he starts to read the rest of it, seeing the sketches and notes made by his other, future self. I can only imagine what it feels like to see what your home will look like in the future; a mixture of sadness to see it depicted in ruin, but also fascination that someone has come to it and – using their skills of deduction and knowledge of ancient history – correctly depicted what (to them) it must have looked like 'in the past'.

Chapter 74

What was Xsia-Minai'Te watching as it moved toward the door?

She had never stopped seeing Paix's wings; she had simply grown so accustomed to the sight of them that she barely gave them a thought anymore. Likewise, the golden light that emanated from him. Like the wings, only she could see it, although Paix sometimes mentioned that he felt it.

But now, it slowly began to glow brighter, radiating out from him. It should have been blinding, but it didn't hurt her eyes. Instead, she watched it, fascinated, as it streamed out from him, and beautiful golden rays of it moved past her, toward where her staff lay against the wall. And then, those rays moved, curving and shimmering as if following something – or someone – that was also moving slowly toward the door.

The rays she is watching are the rays of the Vigil's light, yearning from Paix in her time, toward Pix in the future/alternate time, as Pix is leaving the room. These rays of light are a mirror for Paix's own yearning to find his tormented and grieving 'other self' and to hold him until the guilt and pain of his history fade away.

Chapter 75

The constellation of the Sheaf

The Sheaf lay low on the horizon, just past the mountains; a tall arrangement of stars that betokened the time of harvest and had long been a favourite of his. Instantly recognisable as it arched upwards, two of the brightest of its denizens lay at its opposite corners, and three more lay across the cinch at its centre. Indeed, its shape had once prompted G'tehm ah-Shker to jest that it should be renamed The Constellation of Time, for it resembled an hourglass.

The constellation of the Sheaf is, as you probably guessed from the description of its shape, the story's equivalent to our constellation of Orion. I created several variant constellation names, and you probably noticed that Paix's journal entries were all 'dated' by constellation, rather than by month. Some of the names I came up with (and used in this manner) were the Sheaf, the Bee, the Ibis, and the Scorpion. A couple that I came up with but *didn't* use were the Well and the Vulture.

All of these names are desert-themed or related – having meaning to Paixandrians as a desert people – as befits Astrologer G'tehm ah-Shker's musings (chapter 64) of *"I ponder often what shapes other peoples see in the stars, how they might group them into meaning something only to them. Where we see the Ibis, do they see the Swan? Or do they see not a bird but a plough, or a horse. Or do they see the gods themselves?"*

Paix's loneliness

In this chapter I tried to touch on what it must be like to know that you must endure through time, and that those who experienced events alongside you will eventually be lost to mortality, leaving you as the only person to recall those events. Having nobody to speak with about them and remember them with must be a sorrowful thought, and as I was writing this story, I often thought about how Paix (and, in his own timeline, Pix) would have had to open himself up over the years to letting new friends and acquaintances in, to experience new events with, only to know they will also be gone in the end.

The death of N'dachVeip

I wanted this important moment to be one of mingled sorrow but also joy, as befitted N'dachVeip's general outlook on life. He had a long, charmed, loved and loving life, filled with children and laughter, but deep down – when it came to the moment for him to speak his words to Paix – that old, long-buried pain of his hand being behind so much destruction couldn't help but rear up in one final reminder to him. But he had done so much and worked so hard to atone for it, even though – as we all know – it wasn't his fault. His was just the hand that did what it had to do.

And, again, Paix has lost one of his closest friends, who went through so much alongside him. But their final parting ended in laughter, and what better way for Paix to say farewell to his beloved old friend than with them both giggling at each other?

The red scarf

Just a small thing that I didn't have the chance to include going forward in the story, but which became a headcanon for me, arose from Hadita bringing N'dachVeip's red scarf to the Rainlight Gardens with her, while Paix lit her husband's candle. From this moment, it began to be custom among Paixandrians to bring something that had been precious to or much-loved by the deceased to the Gardens, so that the loved or precious thing could also say goodbye in its own way to its owner. This could be anything from a loved pet (cat, dog, perhaps even a camel) to a workman's well-loved tools.

Chapter 76

Hooboy, here we go. There's a *lot* crammed into this chapter.

Hadita's final gift to Paix

There is significance in Hadita's final gift to Paix, made from Mhenheli's old set of robes. It's not inferred in this chapter, but the intent was that she had now fulfilled her offer/promise to make him something. Her death was always only ever going to come once that had been done.

In this chapter, I wanted to show that love and laughter still filled the manor house, with Hadita surrounded by her family. Her grandchildren, now grown and looking after their siblings' children, and even Paix enjoying the chance to indulge in play with the little ones, metaphorically letting his hair down, even if only to

relish the sight of Hadita giggling at him. I love the moment with him playing at being a q'ayadasi for the children's noisy 'camel caravan'.

Our final meeting with Xsia-Minai'Te

I was reluctant to write three deaths within two chapters, since we'd just had that of N'dachVeip and were about to experience that of Hadita, so I wanted Xsia-Minai'Te's end to be one that she cheerfully accepted, because it's simply what happens to her people. Watching her slowly crystallise over the years as she got older was harder for Paix to see than it was for her to experience. However, she knew that he found it distressing to see happen, so she reassured him every time she saw flickers of concern on his face.

What would happen to her in the end, over the two thousand years until Pix finally discovered the Ancient Capital? Eventually, her crystal form would simply become a fine, glittery dust, and she would scatter to the winds. A fitting end for a seer, to go far and wide like that.

"I always thought that you would have been a wonderful father"

This scene, where Paix carries Hadita across the void, is her recognising the Vigil in him, and giving truth to the name that both Xsia-Minai'Te and Mhenheli gave him: Father of the Nation.

Hadita's family was everything to her. While she doesn't have any of the Vigil in her, she is so loving to all those around her – right from the moment when we first meet her in the apothecary's tent, tending to the wounded from the maelstrom – which is why she recognises the light of the Vigil in Paix when he comes to her in the Land Beyond Death. We see that, as a young girl, she once experienced that light, and her mother told her that she was so lucky, that hardly anyone had ever experienced it.

When Paix carries her, she tells him he holds her like she held all of her babies, and that's how she now knows that every person he carries across the void – every one of his people – is his precious child. He showed this love for his people by whispering their words to the Vigil during the maelstrom, and he now *is* the Vigil, so he is Love.

And then, he tells her that – of everyone he had held as he carried them across the void – he knew it would be her who understood. In the past, he has protested when called the Father of the Nation, but here in this place where he is in the purest form of Love – that of the Vigil – he accepts it.

And, just as he promised her, N'dachVeip was waiting for Hadita, beyond the Well of Stars. Writing this scene made me weep happy tears, to see her joy at being reunited with him, as he reached up to her to draw her down into eternity with him.

Past and present move toward each other

They finally draw closer together! With left-aligned text being Paix (since the chapter started in his viewpoint) and right-aligned text being Pix (since he's in the future, but metaphorically moving back in time to meet his past 'other self') they are each moving through same parts of the castle in their own times. We see Pix moving through the ruined Great Hall, sighing over memories, before Paix enters it himself and sees it bustling with life.

We see Pix in the ruins of the Throne Room, bowing to the ancient piece of the Vigil embedded in the back of the throne, and then Paix entering the corridor that leads into it, meeting with the Head Gardener, where he briefly discusses the new seedlings – symbolic of hope and looking forward to blooms in the future.

And then, the Vigil calls to Paix, as he looks at the throne, feeling “a familiar pull” that could have been the silent call of one of his people for him to attend to their final moments. But he realises this is different. He's feeling a different kind of pull, of yearning.

We see Pix finally finding the heavy wooden box that he knows from his long-ago past holds the copper crown. And, as soon as he lifts it, its weight is enough for him to realise that it's still inside.

We see Paix experience a vision, which simply calls him to 'trust' with the familiar Paixandrian symbol of sand spilling through fingers held aloft. And, when he opens his eyes, he sees a fine trail of sand across the floor, leading toward his rooms, where – in his own time – Pix is now standing with the box that holds the copper crown. The sand trail after the vision is an inference that Paix should trust where it leads and follow it.

We then see Pix, sick to his stomach with nervous, fearful excitement, knowing that a part of his history is in the box on the table before him. We see those nerves in his clumsiness when he accidentally almost breaks the lock. He has to steel himself to open it, because this is such a *monumentally* important moment for

him. His past, the thing he walked away from, the thing he has so much guilt over, is *in. that. box.*

We see Paix stop in front of the door to his rooms, sensing other parts of himself approach, to his left and right. As his vision told him, he trusts, though still curious and wondering, and he opens the door, finally seeing his 'other self' – the man whose pain and guilt he has agonised for decades over wanting to assuage.

As Pix finally opens the box, we see Paix feel a familiar weight (the copper crown) settle upon his brow, and Pix suffers the absolute *gut punch* of the box being empty. This incredible moment of his past has eluded him. And then, he realises he's no longer alone in the room, and he turns.

He is here, he is here, he is here

Finally, the book can write in itself that – at last, and from all times – he has come.

Chapter 77 – Finale

Most of this chapter is – I hope! – self-explanatory. It took me *so long* to tie all the parts of Pix's/Paix's history together with the different timelines, but they all came together in this chapter. However, since I had to do so in the form of fiction, and you might appreciate a simpler explanation...

Sorrow and guilt

This version of him is present-day Pix's timeline, unaltered. He tells Pix, "I am your beginning; you are my end." He is Pix himself, at every point of his current timeline, *moving forward only*, along the arrow of time.

Curiosity and hope

This version of him is present-day Pix's timeline, altered. He tells Pix, "I am the one who walked backwards in time and first witnessed what this place truly is." He is Pix himself, as he moved *backwards* in time until the point where he found Pix in his Copper King form as Paix, at the moment where Ser'Zhege's invitation to the dark elemental fight reached him. From that point, once he had altered Pix's history and created the *new* history that ended in Paix saving his people and bringing them to A'lumiya, he glitches back and forth through time. Curiosity and hope is the Pix who hid in the tree and watched present-day Pix arrive at the Ancient Capital for the first time, who found him weeping on the Greatbridge, and who called him 'brother' because – despite travelling back through time – he

hadn't yet acknowledged that what he was seeing was the 'self' that he had cleaved away from so he could walk back in time and change his history.

The angel

This version of him is the Paix who we've been with throughout; whose fate was eventually altered by curiosity and hope reaching him at the point of Ser'Zhege's letter. This is the Paix who saved his people and let them to A'lumiya, becoming the living embodiment of the Vigil along the way.

I hope (good lord, I sincerely hope!) that all makes sense!

The words of the Vigil

As we progress through Pix meeting each past version of himself, the Vigil speaks to him. Many of the lines she speaks are actually lines from the End Poem in Minecraft. However, some are not:

You are a piece of the past.

This is a reference to Pix's words in Empires S2, after he became a ghost:
"Maybe the archaeologist of the Ancient Capital and the curator of the local museum was... a piece of the past himself all along."

To cure you of sorrow would be to destroy you.

This is from the End Poem: "To cure it of sorrow would destroy it."

You are a piece of the past. To tell you how to live would be to prevent you living.

Repeating the words from Pix's Empires S2 episode, the following words are, again, from the End Poem: "To tell them how to live is to prevent them living."

I did have to make minor alterations to them, to make it fit, but they're all from that poem. Fitting, considering the story's equivalent of the End is where Pix's torment began, at the elemental fight, and it's also where he carries the souls of his people across the void to the Well of Stars.

The emerald ring

Throughout the story, we've seen Pix's copper ring. It starts out battered and dented, and without its emerald, which was lost long ago. During the moment when he found the piece of the Vigil in the back of the A'lumiyan throne, touching it and experiencing that vision where he saw the timeline of his 'other self', when he drew his hand back the ring was now mended and almost as good as new. All

it was missing was the emerald. Now, here in the finale, it becomes what it always was.

He now has the regalia cloak, and he has the emerald ring and the trident. All that's left is the copper crown, and so...

He has become

I've mentioned this on a few occasions in the story, and I know it caused one or two furrowed brows. "He was *becoming* again". I think I should explain 😊 As we moved through the story, he was slowly becoming... whole. Himself. His true self, forgiven for his past, saviour of his people. Initially, this was just a strange feeling that he experienced as he first found himself in his little room beneath the hill, wearing his familiar desert raiment, with the earrings and hair/beard. Then, he felt like he was becoming his old self, but nothing more. Now, we know, and he knows: he is becoming – as he states at the end of this chapter, "I am one. I am all. I am then. I am now."

Shortly and succinctly: all of his timelines have merged.

The embrace

The final embrace of the Vigil, given to her guilt-ridden prophet and keeper of old. Paix – as 'the angel' – finally fulfils his long-held wish, to embrace his 'other self', and he does so with that all-encompassing hug, that pulls Pix's cheek to his. And, just as he did with N'dachVeip amid the ruins of Eastvale, he won't let go until the pain has gone. Crucially, he also allows his wings to embrace Pix. This is symbolic, because it was Pix's use of the wings during the fight with the dark elemental that caused the Vigil to be so anguished at what he'd done. The wings were her gift to him, only to be used for carrying souls across the void to her Well of Stars, and he misused them for his own selfish purpose. By allowing his wings to embrace Pix, Paix (as the angel) is the Vigil forgiving him for that. Now, he only has to forgive himself.

The burden

Pix's burden of guilt and sorrow and anguish for what he did is symbolised by a tiny version of the dark elemental. It's a little baby, much as Violet was the child of the Ender Dragon in Empires SI, and Pix has carried it – metaphorically – around with him for millennia. Like Malin, it's the one thing he has left of his past, and he's been clinging to it, unable to let it go.

But now, with the embrace of the Vigil holding him, even with Paix's wings, Pix finally approaches the burden in his heart. And it behaves like his beloved little comforting companion Malin, butting its head against his hand as he reaches out to it, and making little chirruping noises akin to Malin's little 'mrrt!' sounds of happiness.

He presses a kiss to its scaly little head – a penitent kiss – and finally makes his peace with his past, accepting that it will always be with him, but it needs not shadow his life as it has done for millennia. Now that he knows he made amends, that a part of him – coming here – walked backwards in time and allowed him to save his people, he forgives himself and lets go of his guilt.

“I think that we will meet many times again, though perhaps not always quite like this.”

What Paix (as the angel) meant by this is that all versions of Pix/Paix are now one. We have seen each version of Pix take him back through time, to experience it in reality. We see, at the end of this chapter, that he can now move to any point of his history, at any time, in any timeline. Meeting many times again, though “not always quite like this” is simply a recognition that they will never meet as separate people, as they are now one.

Pix reclaims his name

The final request the angel makes of Pix is to reclaim his name and no longer ‘hide behind the name that others gave to him’. Right at the start, we know that present-day Pix is so-called simply because his students and half the faculty at his university can't pronounce his true name, so he just went along with it. But he also embraced it, and subconsciously he used it as a shield to try and separate himself from his past and his history. But now, at the angel's urging, and now having forgiven himself and made peace with the burden of his guilt, he reclaims his name.

The book that lay open upon a desk in a room beneath a hill

As each version of him walks up to Pix, their ‘line’ in the book on his desk slowly fades away. Finally, as the angel leaves, the book lies empty.

Remember how I asked you to remember the star-painted ceiling in Pix's little room beneath the hill, and how it represents the Well of Stars?

Above the book that lay open upon the nearby desk, something shimmered. Argent light, unseen by peacefully slumbering eyes, gently drifted down onto the blank page, forming silvered words.

He is coming.

These words – unlike all the others – don't write themselves on the page as if made by invisible ink. Instead, they drift down in the form of argent light, from the stars painted on the ceiling.

The Vigil has one final 'he' to bring to Paix, and he is coming from beyond the Well of Stars itself.

Chapter 78 – Epilogue

You all saw it coming, right? I promised you a happy ending, and this happy ending was fully written long before Mhenheli's death in chapter 70.

Above a book that lay open upon a desk in a room beneath a hill...

...an indigo-painted ceiling speckled with delicate silver stars slowly began to move. The stars turned as the painted sky swirled around the ceiling, a living and beautiful echo of eternity. As they moved over the desk, the stars softly began to weep, their argent light falling onto the blank page and forming silvered words. He is here.

The ceiling of Paix's little room below the hill briefly becomes the Well of Stars, pouring their light down onto the book, to tell him that Mhenheli has come back to him.

The words of the Vigil

Before 'Maxwell' arrives, the Vigil speaks to Paix in the quiet of the museum:

We... are not done. Not yet. Your story does not begin here, and neither does it end. There is one more story left to be told.

These words are lifted directly (with one little bit omitted, so that it makes sense for the story) from Pix's Empires S2 finale episode narration:

"We are not done. Not yet. Our stories do not begin here, and neither do they end. But before they fade into obscurity, as so many events do, there is one more story left to be told."

Maxwell

I struggled so much with how I could make Mhenheli's return not be instantly recognisable to Paix – because otherwise the Epilogue would be over in an instant, and that would hardly be satisfying! Eventually I settled on the clouds across Paix's memory that confused him; feelings of déjà vu that he couldn't put his finger on; a familiarity that made no sense but that he just went along with, because the statue told him to 'trust' (by means of the cartouche that Malin brought him).

Let's face it: these two had danced around each other, both terrified to show their true emotions, for most of their lives until present-day Pix forced the issue. Having them be equally awkward in this moment of their reuniting just made sense. Mhenheli, as Maxwell, looks different enough that Paix doesn't recognise him on-sight, but he slowly tries to puzzle out what feels so *right* and familiar about the man, while being frustrated at not being able to pinpoint *why*.

In turn, Maxwell is desperate to tell Paix who he is but has no idea *how* to do that. He doesn't think he can simply blurt out, "Hey, it's me; your stars-bound beloved Chaperone, who has been searching for you through 18 reincarnated lives," because... well, who the hell would believe something like that? Even though he *knows* this is his beloved Paix, he can see that he's not been recognised, and he kind of understands that (though it must be upsetting for him that – while he's not *visually* recognised, he also doesn't seem to be *sensed* as being Paix's stars-bound companion). His hair and eye colour are the same as they were when he and Paix were last together in A'lumiya, and he has roughly the same build as he once did, but he's born – in this life – of different parents, obviously, so he doesn't look the same.

Maxwell sees Malin

Of course, Maxwell can see Malin as a real cat, rather than as the ethereal teal cat they have always been to Paix. As explained earlier, Mhenheli's 'soul gratitude' forms part of Malin, and is the reason why they became a cat. To him, Malin is 'coloured like sand or honey' (and I'm sure you can figure out why I chose those two colours!)

Maah'qab tazū alaa'qab, id'haye nahid

My heart cherishes your heart, for it knows we are one.

The vow finally returned. Paix whispered those words immediately before Mhenheli sank into the Well of Stars. The words that neither of them had spoken to each other, even though they had been together in a loving platonic relationship for years by the time Mhenheli died. They'd just never seen a need to utter the vow, because they *knew* they were one. But Paix felt compelled to whisper those words to Mhenheli in those final moments, yet Mhenheli didn't have the chance to whisper them in return, to seal the vow.

18 long, always-searching lives later, he finally could.

Nothing is ever truly lost

And here, finally, the understanding of what the Vigil has been telling Paix all along.

Beloved. Nothing is ever truly lost. Once was carved into me the truth that I am Love. And I carved words into you; words so deep and true that you carried them without knowing your truths, but I promised you would know them one day. This is that day. You have had many names, many titles, but these are your truths. You are the daylight. You are the night. You are not alone. And I love you, because you are Love.

His beloved Mhenheli, his stars-bound, has returned to him, never truly lost. There was always hope.

And the final words – Paix's truths – are from the End Poem:

and the universe said you are the daylight
and the universe said you are the night
and the universe said the darkness you fight is within you
and the universe said the light you seek is within you
and the universe said you are not alone
and the universe said you are not separate from every other thing
and the universe said you are the universe tasting itself, talking to itself, reading
its own code
and the universe said I love you because you are love

He is the daylight (the desert sun)
He is the night (the ruined Ancient Capital)
The darkness that he fought was within him (his own guilt)
The light he sought was within him (self-forgiveness)
He is not alone (the Vigil is always with him, as is Malin)
He is not separate from every other thing (his long life has touched so many others)
He is the universe tasting itself, talking to itself, reading its own code (he moves through time, affecting every aspect of it)
And he is loved because he is love (he is the Vigil, and the Vigil is Love)

“Later,” he murmured. “We have plenty of time.”

And they do. All of eternity, together.



Illustration: Sabira Langevin | Flower of Laurelin

Final notes

This truly is the end of this mammoth undertaking, and I can finally mark this story as Completed on AO3. There will be more, as and when I come up with little side-stories and the like, and you can find those here: [These Stones Remember II](#).

Lastly, as promised, I have pulled the entire story together into one nicely-formatted PDF file, complete with the beautiful cover and end illustration by Sabira Langevin. It's almost 500 pages long, and you have my blessing – should you wish to, and if bookbinding is something you enjoy – to bind a copy of it for your personal use only.

[Click here to download the PDF.](#)

Thank you for reading 😊