

Year of the Four Emperors

K. A. Khan

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Year of the Four Emperors is a fantasy novel that questions what can happen when a nation becomes unwilling to accept progress and change.

Humans and vampires fight over power and wealth in K. A. Khan's fantasy novel *Year of the Four Emperors*.

Few people mourn the murder of Emperor Severus, a cruel and lecherous despot. But with his unexpected death comes a succession crisis: Severus never got the chance to announce which of his sons—Andronikos, Commodus, Leo, or Zeno—would take the throne. Now the four half brothers, each convinced that only he is qualified to run the Empire of Kristianborg, must contend with threats from inside and outside the empire. One by one, they try their hand at ruling over their father's troubled lands.

Each of the brothers has different strengths, weaknesses, and enemies, leading them to very different fates. They all share a ruthless streak that drives them to take horrible actions in pursuit of the throne—often calling into question their suitability to rule. A corrupt court and scheming women add to the empire's woes. Each character tries to manipulate events to their advantage or allows dangerous, outdated traditions to prevail, despite the long-term risk to the empire.

Excitement pervades the book; a scene in which a vampire army summons the undead to aid them is chilling. But the story's overarching serious tone is interrupted by blithe understatements that imply sarcasm. And its sprawling worldbuilding draws on a variety of folkloric traditions: it includes vampires, warring kingdoms, and magical artifacts. The resultant abundance of characters, historical events, and locations is handled via frequent exposition that leaves little time for developing the four brothers as individuals or in relationship to one another.

The book is often off-putting: offensive terminology is used to refer to characters of color; one of the brothers' fatphobia is distasteful. The story of how a power-hungry mercenary learns about blood drinking in Golem Grad and introduces the practice to Kristianborg leans into antisemitic tropes regarding blood libel. Further, awkward phrasing throughout the book impedes its delivery.

Even when the war between the brothers has been settled, many dangers remain for the survivors to confront, and new alliances and old grudges leave plenty of material for future installments. However, the prologue—which hints at events in future books—introduces a potential inconsistency: it is not clear why a woman who possesses the power to control anyone does not go after the man who has what she wants rather than seducing a third party to do it for her.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 13, 2023)

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